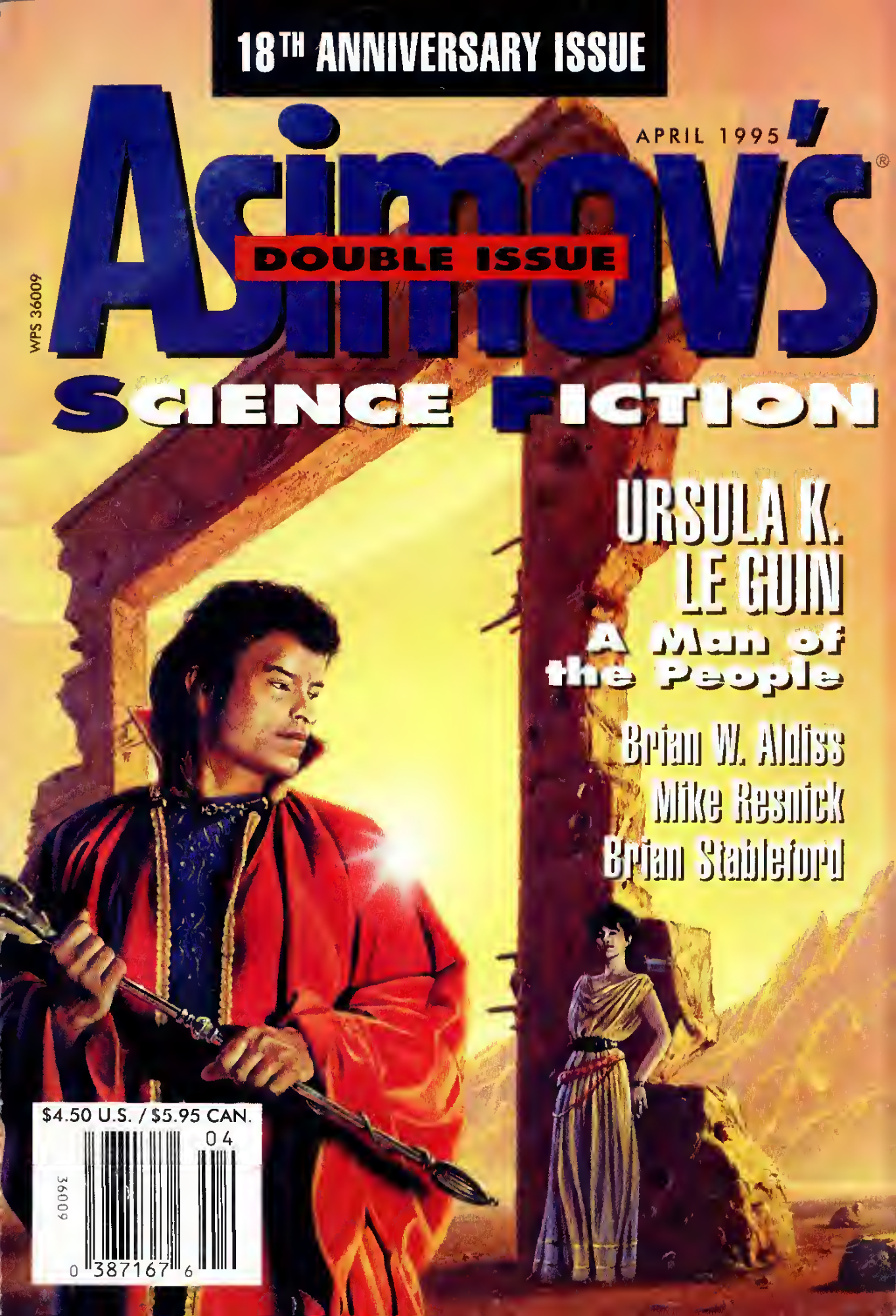
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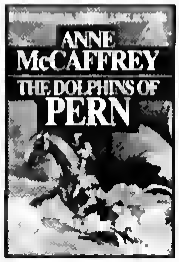
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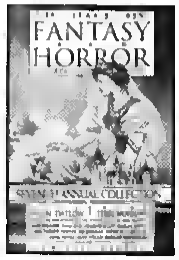
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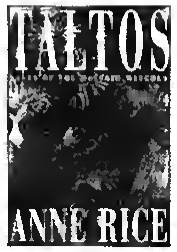
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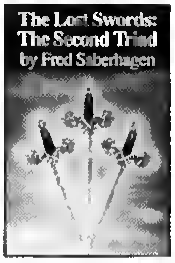
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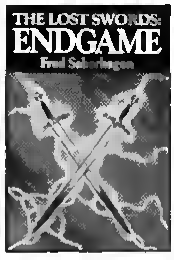
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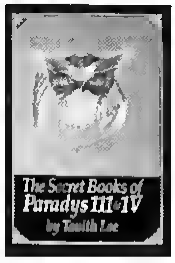
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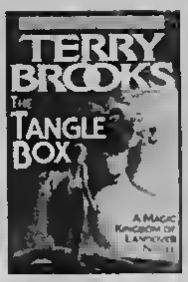
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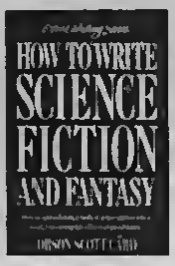
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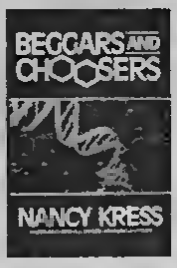
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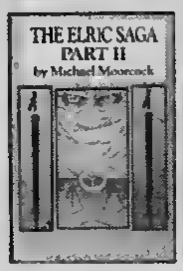
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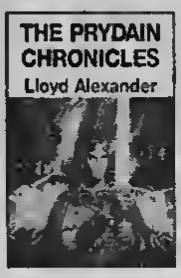
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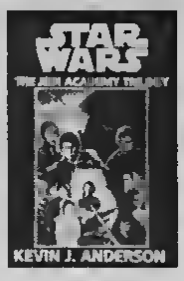
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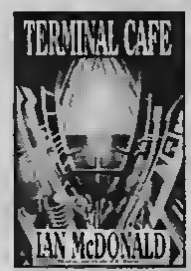
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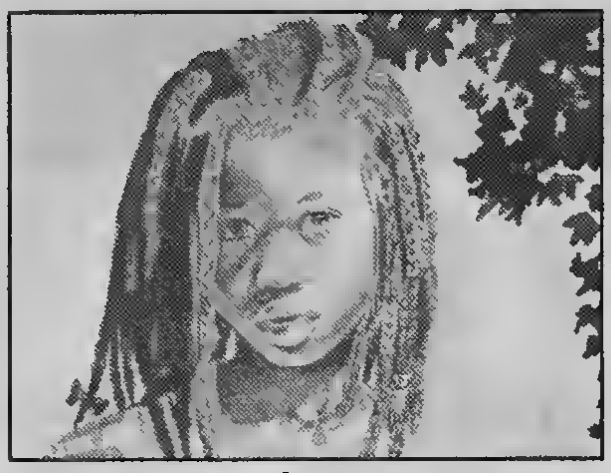
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GUEST EDITORIAL

by Janet Asimov

HEY, WRITERS—MAKE US FEEL BETTER!

Well, at least occasionally. In a world fungating with nastiness and gloom, there must be a few readers besides me who are tired of the epidemic of unpleasantness. The remedy is hope and laughter. Please, writers, give us a regular dose of a *few* stories that make us feel better.

You don't have to be a head-in-the-sand optimist. You don't have to believe that "happily ever after" is the only way to end a piece of fiction. Sad stories and great tragedies give emotional catharsis as well as food for thought; unpleasantness is ultimately boring.

So much modern writing in all genres makes people feel worse, if not hopeless and helpless. Readers are pushed to wallow in misery, persuaded to believe that only the brutal and the repulsive are real.

Many writers seem to think their special job is to shock the world by hitting it over the head with its own ugliness. They forget that humanity has come a long way from the days of Victorian niceties and repression.

No one puts skirts on piano legs any more. The Hays office has been dead for years. With world-wide television, we are well acquainted not only with our own psychological ugliness but with every horrible happening anywhere on the planet.

It's so easy to write about fear, trembling, and sickness unto death these days, when everyone now lives with the real possibility of human-induced final destruction of our biosystem. It's much harder work to show that humans are more than their own pathology; that they are capable of noble effort.

Disposing of loose ends by carefully thinking the worst is certainly a good way to avoid the hard work of constructive thinking. A step further leads to the Armageddon mentality, a fixed belief in final answers achieved at the cost of universal catastrophe (caused by a deity or by us). With salvation, of course, for those with accredited beliefs.

It's dangerous to exploit and augment the human tendency to "fall into helplessness," and its sequelae—negativity and apathy ("what's the use"), wishful thinking ("somebody else will solve this problem") and—especially—vio-

lence. (Which reminds me that Isaac said, "violence is the last refuge of the incompetent.")

It's simple for writers to excuse themselves by saying that Shakespeare could transcend the unpleasantness and violence of his times because he was a genius and anyway the Elizabethans had standards to give them a sense of order, justice, and goodness —which nowadays are outmoded words, and don't make money.

We human beings are part of the development of the universe. Maybe any intelligent part of the universe has the responsibility for creating standards and goals—for writing about them, living them, and laughing a little as we do so.

Sure, life is grim—but as L. M. Montgomery had a teacher say to a writer, "There is a place for satire—there are gangrenes that can only be burned out—but leave the burning to the great geniuses. It's better to heal than hurt." ●

Some of this article was adapted from a chapter by Janet Asimov in How to Enjoy Writing, *by Janet and Isaac Asimov (Walker, 1987). Mrs. Asimov writes a weekly science column for the L.A.* Times *Syndicate. She has published several short stories and eighteen books with one in press and a few in the word processor.*

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. . .AND THEN THERE WERE SIX

A few months back my wife Karen and I had the opportunity to visit two of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World the same week, while we were touring Turkey's Aegean coast. It was one more lesson—as though we really needed one—about the transit of Gloria Mundi.

The Greeks were fond of compiling lists of the Seven Wonders, not as guidebooks for travelers (since there was never a time when all seven Wonders were in existence simultaneously) but simply as summaries of mankind's greatest artistic achievements. Several of these lists have come down to us, the earliest being one that was drawn up by a poet named Antipater of Sidon in the middle of the second century B.C. Since most of those who drew up the lists were Greeks, it turned out, unsurprisingly, that most of the wonders they chose were products of Greek artistry (except for a couple of un-Greek items that were simply too spectacular to be ignored).

The various lists differ in minor ways from one another, but there is general agreement on six of the seven Wonders:

—The Great Pyramid of Egypt
—The Hanging Gardens of Babylon
—The Statue of Zeus at Olympia
—The Temple of Artemis at Ephesus
—The Mausoleum of Halicarnassus
—The Colossus of Rhodes.

Some of the earlier lists give seventh place to the Palace of Cyrus, King of Persia, and others award the trophy to the Walls of Babylon. But somewhere along the way both of these were dropped, and by the sixth century A.D., when the list took its final form, the designated seventh Wonder was:
—The Lighthouse of Alexandria.

(The Great Wall of China didn't make the cut because the Greeks had never heard of China. Stonehenge isn't on the list because that too was off the main tourist itinerary in those days. The Temple of Solomon at Jerusalem might have qualified, but perhaps it was felt that Zeus, Artemis, and Apollo might be annoyed at sharing the list with a shrine to a barbarian god. And the Colosseum of Rome hadn't even been built yet in Antipater's time. On the other hand,

how did the Parthenon get overlooked, or the Temple of Apollo at Delphi? Go figure.)

Of the official seven, Karen and I had seen just one before this trip: The Great Pyramid of Egypt. And it is a marvel indeed. The Great Pyramid is the oldest Wonder on the list by a matter of several thousand years, and it's by far the biggest, too. Mere statistics don't communicate its vastness, except perhaps the accurate calculation of one of Napoleon's engineers, who determined in 1798 that it contains enough stone to build a wall ten feet high and a foot wide all the way around France. You read that it's 450 feet tall, that its base measures 756 feet in length along each of the four sides, that it's made up of 2,300,000 blocks of stone that average two and a half tons in weight, and you register "big," all right, but there's no substitute for standing right next to it and gawking in wonder at that vast mountain of stone blotting out the sky before you.

The Great Pyramid has suffered a little damage since the early Greek travelers were putting together those lists. When they saw it, it was covered by a casing of smooth, fine white limestone blocks, surely a dazzling sight in the brillian Egyptian sunlight. But those were stripped away a thousand years ago and used in the construction of Cairo. Still, the core that survives, massive, rugged, unbeautiful, is wondrous enough.

As for the other six Wonders, though—

No dice for the Colossus of Rhodes. That gigantic bronze statue in the harbor, as tall as the Statue of Liberty and even more massive, was knocked down by an earthquake only fifty-six years after it was erected, lay in pieces in the harbor of Rhodes for centuries, and eventually was bought and carted away by an Arab dealer in scrap metal, fourteen centuries ago. The Lighthouse of Alexandria fell to an earthquake also, about A.D. 1375. The Statue of Zeus at Olympia, forty feet high and made of ivory and plates of gold fastened over a wooden framework, was destroyed in the fifth century A.D. at the order of the devoutly Christian Emperor Theodosius II, who saw it as a troublesome relic of pagan antiquity. As for the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, a rooftop spectacle kept lush and green by hidden water-carrying machinery, they fell into ruin after the conquest of Babylon by the Persians in 539 B.C. What remains of the great city of Babylon can be seen just outside Baghdad by those doughty travelers who care to visit Saddam Hussein's Iraq, but Karen and I are not quite that venturesome. (Supposedly Saddam plans to have the palace of Babylon, Hanging Gardens and all, reconstructed as a tourist attraction. Somehow I doubt that I'll make the trip.)

Three of the Wonders, then, are gone without a trace, and the ruins of the fourth are beyond my reach

in Iraq. But, systematic explorer that I am, I could not pass up the opportunity to check out the two remaining ones on the list once I realized that we were going to drive right past them on our trip to Turkey.

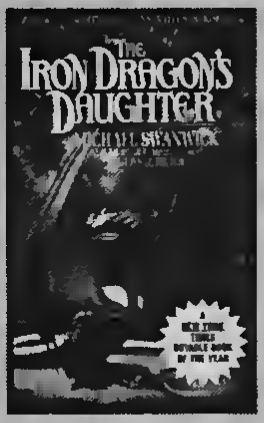
"Drive right past" is precisely what we did when we came to the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus. Since it lay on the highway between our hotel and the main excavation sites at Ephesus, we drove past it at least half a dozen times in the course of two days before we even noticed that it was there.

It was rather more eye-catching once upon a time, of course. Pliny the Elder, writing about A.D. 60, called it "the most wonderful monument of Grecian magnificence," and an early book on the Seven Wonders, credited to the Greek engineer Philon of Byzantium, declares, "when I saw the temple at Ephesus rising to the clouds, all these other wonders were put in the shade." It was a structure of white marble, 425 feet long, 225 feet wide, with a massive roof supported by more than a hundred 60-foot-high stone columns arranged in a double row all around the building. (The Parthenon in Athens, best known of the Greek temples, was 230 feet long, 100 feet wide, and had 58 marble columns, each 34 feet high.) Within and without it was everywhere ornamented with sculptures and paintings of extraordinary beauty and power.

That was not what we saw. What we saw was a single bare column, sticking up out of a muddy, weedy field. The Romans had long ago carried off most of the temple's artistic treasures to Italy; the Goths had sacked what was left; with the rise of Christianity in the fourth century, the remains of the building were used as a quarry to build a great church (itself now a ruin) in the nearby town, and, later, a mosque. Such fragments of sculpture as still survived were carted off in the nineteenth century by the archaeologist John T. Wood, and now are on display at the British Museum in London. The lone column is all that marks the site today.

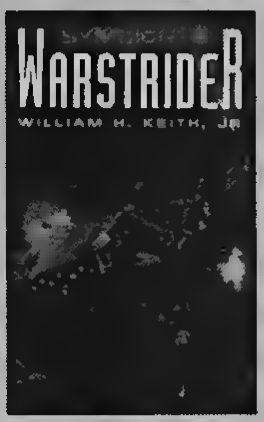
The seventh of the Wonders, the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus, has fared scarcely better. This was the great tomb that King Mausoleus built for himself at the southern end of Asia Minor's Aegean coast about 350 B.C.—a stunning, majestic structure of white marble, 140 feet high, topped by a marble chariot drawn by four colossal horses, with huge statues of Mausoleus and his queen standing within it. All about its lower part were sculptured reliefs: Greek soldiers fighting Amazons, Centaurs at war with a people called the Lapiths, and a depiction of a chariot race.

For seventeen centuries this masterpiece of architecture stood intact above the lovely seaport of Halicarnassus. (Which, when the Turks conquered Asia Minor, was renamed Bodrum—a word meaning "dungeon.") Then a series of earthquakes—the bane of the



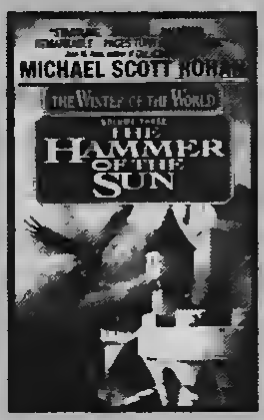
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Seven Wonders—brought it crashing down, and its fallen stones were hauled away to be used in the construction of a Crusader fortress on the waterfront. The fortress is still there, and an imposing thing it is. But all that Karen and I were able to see of the Mausoleum itself was its foundation and a few bits of wall. Here, too, a nineteenth-century British archaeologist, Charles Thomas Newton, had collected the surviving fragments of sculpture and taken them to the British Museum. There are photographs of them—some weather-worn reliefs, a ten-foot-high statue of Mausoleus, a broken chariot wheel—inside the much humbler museum at the site in Bodrum.

It is a sobering business, visiting these Seven Wonders. Except for the Great Pyramid, which even now is still an awesome sight, they bring to mind the hollow boast of Shelley's proud Ozymandias: "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" Of Ozymandias' great structure nothing remains but "two vast and trunkless legs of stone" and "a shattered visage," while "round the decay of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare, the lone and level sands stretch far away." We science fiction writers like to throw millennia around like handfuls of coins—but how little, really, survives the tooth of time even for a few hundred years!

And just yesterday, I see, the American Society of Civil Engineers produced a revised list of Seven Wonders of the United States. They had done one once before—in 1955—but only two of those seven, Hoover Dam and the Panama Canal, were carried over to the new list. The ones that were dropped—*sic transit gloria mundi*!—were the Empire State Building, the San Francisco Bay Bridge, Grand Coulee Dam, the Chicago sewage disposal system, and the Colorado River Aqueduct. All five of them still exist, of course, but have come to seem insufficiently wondrous, I suppose, and were replaced in the latest tally by the Golden Gate Bridge, the Interstate Highway System, the New York World Trade Center, the Kennedy Space Center, and the Trans-Alaska Pipeline.

Wonders never cease, they say. But how long, I wonder, will these latest Wonders last? ●



CompuServe address for editorial letters only (no electronic submissions, please): 71154,662. From the Internet: 71154.662@compuserve.com.

LETTERS

Dear *Asimov's*,

Thanks for "The Hole in the Hole" (February 1994) by Terry Bisson. He has a unique voice blending humor, character and plot with outrageous "pocket universe" concepts. He is obviously nuts about cool cars, especially Volvos, and I don't blame him. I used to borrow a Volvo 122 from a professor in college. *Bisson's novelette is the horse to beat for 1994.* I also liked "The Tree of Life" (September 1994) by Stableford and your new lizard guy, Alan Gordon, with his piano-shenanigans. Nothin' wrong with Silverberg being on your crew! His novel, *Hot Sky at Midnight* is sexist, but okay.

Stan Fink
Philadelphia, PA

Dear Mr. Silverberg:

Regarding your "Reflections" column on transplanting fetal ovaries, I agree with you in the main that the vagueness of many arguments against "unnatural" scientific experiments has come to seem quaint in hindsight—your example of smallpox vaccination is particularly apt—but you fail to address two points that seem to me important.

First, and more problematical, is one possible answer to your suggestion that new reproductive (or other) technology is not reasonably opposed "if the technical skills exist and the demand for their use is strong, *and* the real benefits of the new processes clearly outweigh the supposed ethical drawbacks . . ." (italics mine). A point you do not raise, and one that is raised distressingly seldom in debates over various reproductive issues, especially whether or not abortion on demand should be legal, is that *our planet is overpopulated* and becoming more so all the time. I see no easy answer to this problem, but it seems to me that it is a real issue that should be considered in the question of whether or not it is an unqualified Good Thing to make available technology to make more and more babies.

Second, you quote columnist Ellen Goodman as asking, "Will brain-dead or dying females become egg donors the way they are now kidney or liver donors?" and answer her, "Why not?" I find it shocking to think that anyone would believe that "dying" people are used as organ donors. They are not. To use dying patients as donors would be murder. Although some organ donors (of single kidneys and, in a recent development, of single lobes of lungs) have been healthy volunteers, most are neither healthy nor dying; they are already dead.

As the spouse of a transplant candidate (double lung), I have been amazed at the ignorance that surrounds organ transplantation in this country, including the widespread idea that "brain-dead" and "really dead" are different things; this, in fact, may be where Ms. Goodman got her idea that dying patients are used as organ donors. The term "brain death" refers to the condition in which the heart has stopped pumping blood to the brain, causing *irreversible* damage to and death of the brain; the body is then incapable of functioning without machines (which nevertheless can keep the heart pumping blood to the body and the lungs expanding and contracting for quite a long time), and the patient is dead. Only after death has occurred, with the exceptions noted above, may organs be donated.

Thanks for letting me raise my objections. I do agree with the main point of the column, that "There Are Some Things That Mankind Was Not Meant to Achieve" is not a valid argument against scientific experimentation. I have always thought it arrogant of anyone to claim to know what is "meant" for an entire species to do or not to do.

Sincerely,

Susan Hathaway
Whittier, California

Dear Mr. Silverberg,

This is in response to your "Reflections" column of August concerning the fetal ovary matter. I hope that I'm not one of many letters you've received on this column, as my letter would probably get lost in the shuffle—mentally. I also want you to know that I'm not an ultra-conservative Jesus-freak, shoving my Bible up your nose.

But I do have some problems with the idea of using the ova from aborted fetuses for fertility substitutes, problems which were not touched on in your column.

My main reservation lies not with the use of ova from children that were never born *per se*, but with the *a priori* assumption of abortion as defensible.

Now, to see this we need some perspective. All arguments of whether a fetus is a "person" or not aside (as if trying to define something in terms of another indefinable is worthwhile), one must admit that a fetus is human life —that is, a potential human being of a unique genetic combination (as opposed to tissue which is part of another being) at a certain point in its development.

Now, I don't know if a fetus has a "soul" (again, an indefinable). But I do know that summarily declaring that it has none is not without precedent in human civilization. We have always been quick as a species to declare another group (usually one without a voice) as inferior, not really human. These assumptions have been the causes of cultural imperialism, bigotry, sexism, and racial slavery.

In case the parallel seems strained to you, remember: following on the heels of each decree that Group X is not One Of Us, that group has become treated as a commodity—*chattel*.

You argue that a baby should be considered the child of its gestational mother rather than its genetic mother, because she was the

A world in turmoil.

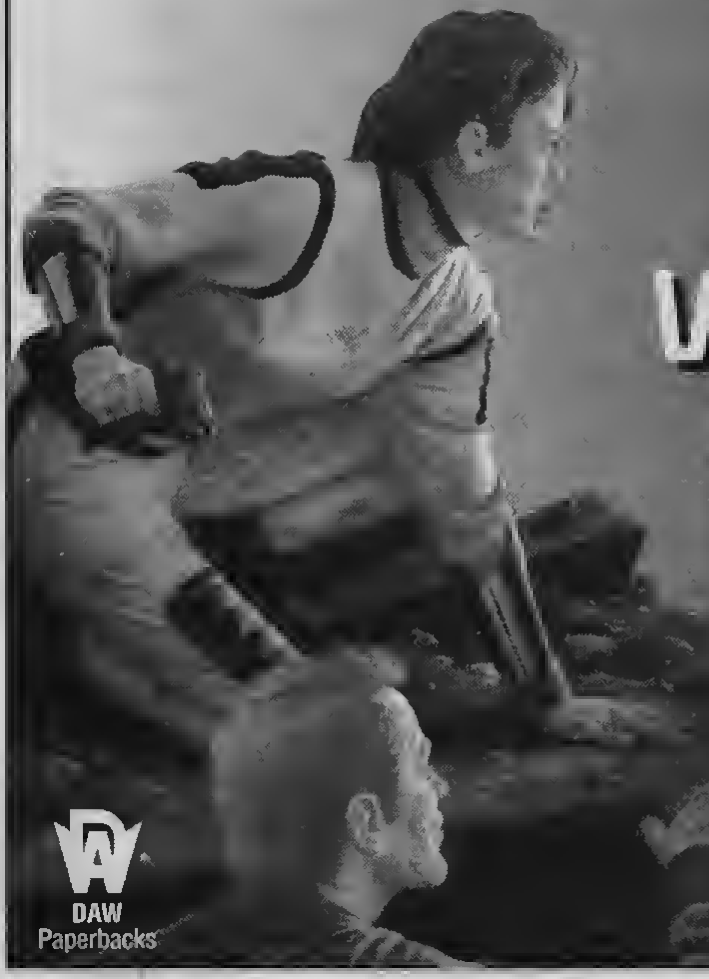


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nurturing presence. The same argument can be made for adoption: after all, if there are a lot of viable fetuses being aborted, and on the other hand there are couples hungry for children, doesn't it seem like a perfect case for the concept of supply and demand? (of course, this takes us into another issue entirely, so . . .)

I guess my main objection to your stance is that it codifies the declaration of aborted fetuses as non-persons, by using that assumption as the springboard for a discussion on the worth of aborted fetuses as a commodity. Looking back on our human track record, I think we need to have at least a little bit of doubt in our evaluations of person-ness before we move on to the chattel discussion.
Yours,

Nathan Shumate
Cedar City, UT

Dear Mr. Silverberg:

I appreciated your column in the July 1994 issue of *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine. In that column, you noted a decline in science fiction publishing. I too have noticed changes, and it may be these changes are interrelated. The changes I have noted suggest that the decline in science fiction is a function of the same causes of the decline of non-science fiction.

In the 1950s the fiction short story was being published in magazines such as the *Saturday Evening Post*. A typical short story was, for example, by C. S. Forester featuring Horatio Hornblower as an officer of the British Navy. Despite the name of the hero, it was successful. It was a combination of several elements: high seas adventure, a quasi-hero whose personality was a partial handicap, and interpersonal dynamics. After trials and tribulations, Hornblower finally found a way to survive and at least partially win.

My reading quickly shifted to science fiction instead of standard fiction. I returned to regular fiction a few years ago, but gave it up quickly. The new norm for "significant fiction" was beautifully constructed detail (often of no importance to the story itself)—slice-of-life with a negative ending. But I don't read to become depressed. I suggest that the new norm killed off the American short story market. Who wanted to read them?

With no magazines in which to publish, what were the writers of the new norm to do? The rational thing: change the story just enough to publish it in magazines that were selling. And so we have a number of articles that have been only science fiction in a trivial manner, but have followed the new norm of beautiful crafting even if irrelevant with depressing endings. If this hypothesis is correct, it would explain the drop off in science fiction to which you referred. Who wanted to read them?

Seeing the new norm in science fiction has been depressing for several reasons. First it is depressing to see trends that may kill off science fiction. Second the stories are depressing. Third it is depressing to see stories with irrelevant detail (even if beautifully crafted).

Science fiction is, if true to its name, *science* fiction. It must therefore be based in extrapolations from science. I would include "soft"

as well as "hard" science. Indeed the major distinction of science continues to be, regardless of area, a search for answers with empirical validation across investigators. Successful science is successful answers, and since they are successful they lead to engineering that produces successful solutions to problems. Hence the general norm for a science fiction story is that some facet of science is an essential characteristic of the story and that it ends in successful solution. The science base might be in some contemporary development or by postulating another world/time in which the new situation exists. Because it is science fiction, I also hope to learn some science in many of the stories.

Of course "the general norm" is just that, a general norm. We need the change of pace story that points to the fallibilities of science and scientists. But even in disappointment, scientists still reach out to solutions: "Given the findings of this article, theory X is not an explanation for the phenomena. The next research should . . ." If fiction is science fiction, it needs to do so also.

Let's take a look at the stories in the magazine in which your column was published. Here is a brief run-down:

Goldstein's "The Narcissus Plague." The scientific basis is set in the first paragraph and consistently carried out without "stuffing."

Stableford's "The Scream." Good story telling but telepathic powers have completely negative evidence from empirical studies and there is no extrapolation whatsoever from any hard or soft science that would support it. This and the negative ending mark it as more new norm fantasy than science fiction.

Nordley's "Out of the Quiet Years." Good science base and I learned a little more about magnetic fields.

Bell's "Mrs. Lincoln's China." Thin science base.

Taylor's "The Man in the Dinosaur Court." Reasonable science base and reasonably written.

McDevitt's "Windrider." Science base okay but typical new norm depressing story that can kill the field.

Tiedemann's "Drink." Thin science base and typical new norm depressing story.

Arnason's "The Lovers." Good science base of another culture which is consistently carried out and helps us look at ourselves again.

So there were three stories that make me not want to buy another copy of this magazine.

Now perhaps you can see why I am worried for *Asimov's*. While it produced an impressive number of the Hugo winners, it also has an impressive irrelevant and depressive story rate.

To reply that "there are lots of views as to what science fiction is, so the above discussion is irrelevant to what an editor actually does" is inappropriate. First it makes the label on the magazine of "science" fiction into false advertising. Second, to continue the same new norm shift that has occurred means that we can expect the death of our science fiction magazines. I, for one, am about at the point of canceling my subscrip-

tions. I don't have the time or need for irrelevant detail, stories from which I can learn little about science, and to pay both in dollars and in time to be depressed. And why should I have to read half way through a story to see if it is science fiction when the magazine says that is what it publishes?

Fortunately the solution is simple for science fiction magazines: careful selection of stories and encouraging writers to clarify their stories so that they can indeed be science fiction.

Sincerely,

Rich Gorsuch, Ph.D.
Altadena, CA

Dear Mr. Dozois:

We've heard some talk recently, and we'll hear more as we approach the turn of the century, as to precisely when the century turns. As Robert Silverberg pointed out in the October issue of *Asimov's*, some folks (probably a majority) believe this will happen at the beginning of January 1, 2000. Others hold that it will be January 1, 2001. Mr. Silverberg happens to be a member of the latter group; I belong to the former. I've known for some time about the existence of the two groups, and it never really bothered me until Mr. Silverberg took the trouble to tell me I'm in error. He rightly predicts that there will be a lot of correspondence on this subject, so I might as well jump in.

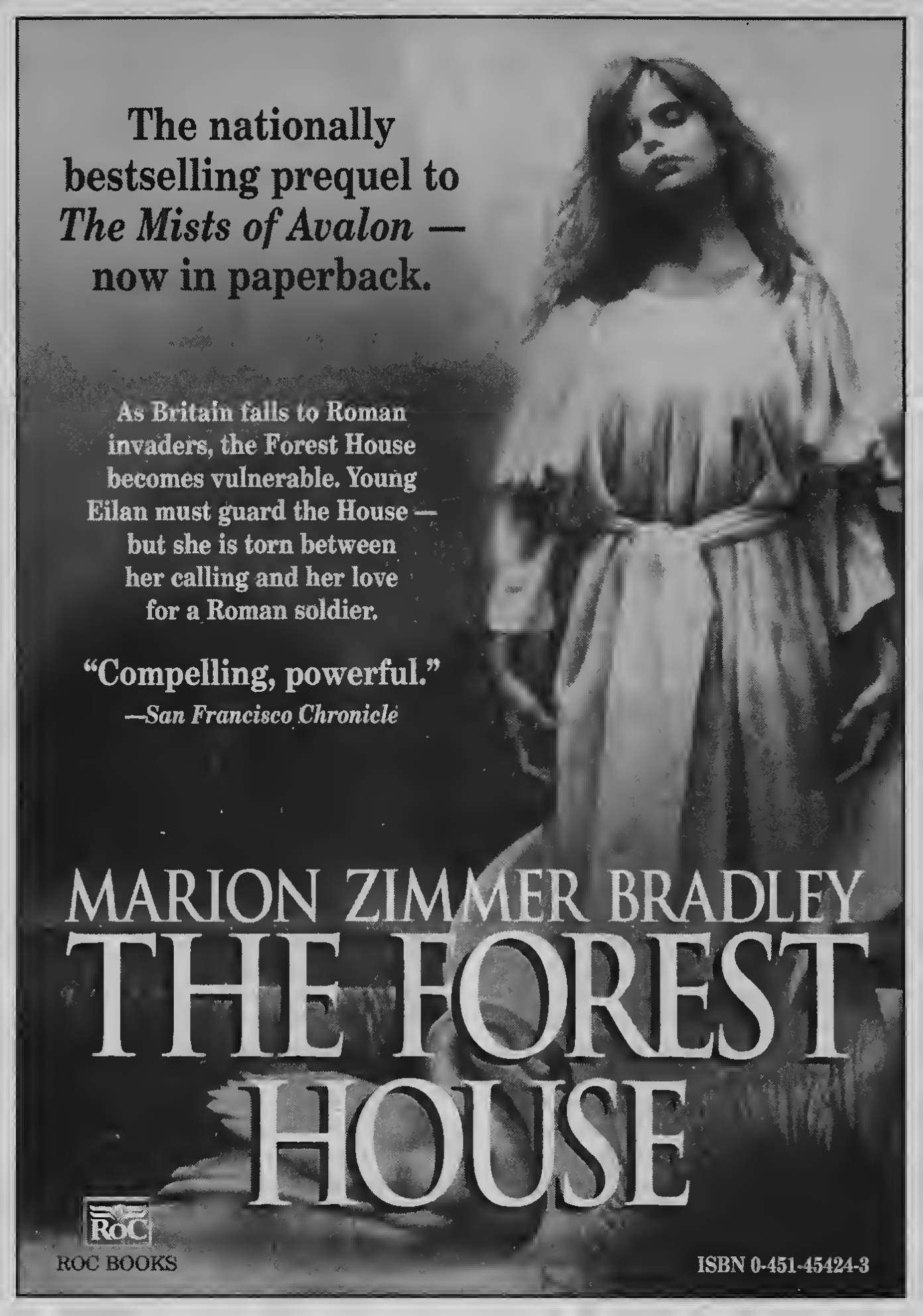
It seems to me that the arguments I hear for the 2001 "millennium" are all predicated on the assumption that there was no year zero. I've heard this a lot, but it's a canard. Any time you use numbers to count things, you have to remember that zero is one of the numbers, and that's where you start counting. There *was* a year zero. It was the year just before the year +1 (we say A.D. 1) and just after the year −1 (or 1 B.C.).

Let me put it another way. When we say that this is the year 1994, we mean that 1,994 years have passed since the arbitrary point in time that marks the beginning of the date numbering system we call the Gregorian Calendar. We're in the 1,995th year of the system, and when it's over we'll say it's 1995. (If you don't believe me, perhaps you'll explain why we say we're in the twentieth century when we've only completed nineteen, and why a man in his forty-seventh year of life is said to be forty-six years of age. The answer, of course, is the dictates of common usage of numbers.) On January 1, 2000, we will have completed exactly 2000 years since the beginning of our system; we'll be starting the 2,001st year, and I'll be celebrating like crazy. Then on January 1, 2001—what the hell—I'll celebrate again with Mr. Silverberg.

Regards,

Ted McElroy
Austin, TX

Good try, no cigar. There wasn't any Year Zero. Nobody starts counting anything with zero, because zero is a content-tree number, an empty barrel that doesn't have any barrel staves either. The Christian calendrical system begins with Year One Anno Domini as of Jesus' birth. (Actually fudging things by a few days, since Jesus' official birthday is Dec 25, and the Chris-



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tian year, like the Roman, begins on Jan 1.) Jesus was one year old, officially, on the first day of 2 A.D. The first century A.D. covers the hundred years from 1 to 100, as you can see by counting on your fingers. The hundredth year hasn't been completed until the end *of the year 100. The second century begins in 101 A.D., and so on right up to the twenty-first, which gets going properly on January 1, 2001 A.D. Of course you and I know that nobody's going to pay attention to that pedantic detail in a country that thinks "fortuitous" means "fortunate" and that a phrase like "too big of a deal" makes grammatical sense. But you've come up with the best compromise I've heard yet. Let's welcome the twenty-first century two years in a row—the big blowout for the numerically illiterate on December 31, 1999, and then quiet little wink-of-the-eye sort of party a year later for the stuffy old fogies who know how to count on their fingers.*

—Robert Silverberg

Dear Robert:

It seems to me that your "Reflections" column in the August issue, on transplanting fetal ovaries into infertile women, either misses or ignores an important point: all the objections you quoted are nothing more than extensions of the usual anti-abortion rhetoric. All the cited quotes are in exactly the same terms we always hear from these folks. What is "unnatural" is not the procedure, it's the source of the ovaries. One suspects that these same "ethicists" (a self-serving title for moralizing busybodies if I ever heard one) would accept artificial ovaries, or even ovaries from miscarried fetuses (ignoring that such a source normally supplies very poor tissue). Thus, although they use the same arguments that were used against vaccination, the source is religious/moralistic rather than fear. As such it's a different argument, and a much harder one to overcome.

I agree with your conclusion that in the future this whole argument will seem quaint, but overcoming the opposition to the procedure depends at least as much upon recognizing the source of the opposition as upon the technical ability to perform the transplant and the demand for it. After all, it only takes another regressive government to set back research again, and to legislate against fetal tissue transplant, but it can take decades to undo that damage.

Sincerely,

K. A. Boriskin
Bellingham, MA

Dear Mr. Dozois:

I'd like to toot your horn; and in public to boot . . .

Most of your readers are probably unaware of the *Guide to Good Writing*, a recent release from The Writer's Digest outfit. An extremely solid anthology of how-to articles has been culled (by some of the hardest-boiled editors around) from the thousands published between the 1920s and today.

What should intrigue your readers is that, of those articles selected from the mid-'70s on, **roughly half are by Science Fiction authors**. I think this event settles the fringe/mainstream question once and for all.

Articles by Asimov, Bova, Card, Ellison . . . and I think your readers will be most interested to learn that the real gate-opener was written back in 1976 by one Gardner Dozois. . . .

. . . on behalf of all your readers: are we quietly proud!

Sincerely yours,

Tom Hall
Lawrence, MI

Dear Editor:

Your October cover by Kinuko Y. Craft is beautifully Pulpish and exotic. You probably do not recall the *Fantastic Adventures* pulps of the early 1940s, but I luckily possess a few, and Craft's cover rivals them.

Wil McCarthy's "The Blackery Dark" (October 1994) is an excellent, sort of Lovecraftian, horror story. I also liked "Les Fleurs du Mal" (October 1994) by Stableford (great titles for both tales)!

I regret putting the October issue in my stacks out of sight. It deserves being made into a poster for my wall. Thank you for an issue that fairly cries out to be enjoyed!

Bruce Moffitt
Brookfield, MO

Asimov's:

First of all, let me say that you certainly have a fine magazine established, with an awful lot of good writing. There's an awful lot of reading to be read in there, and I've read most of it, I'd say. Contributions range from high tech SF to fantasy to the extremely-bizarre-why-read-it to the kind that I'd consider good literature, something you'd expect in an English book somewhere.

I think your extreme variety complemented with a good deal of depth (as contributions can range up to fifty pages, and still not demand the commitment of a full-fledged novel) gives you a great deal of strength.

Having a gift subscription since February (paying for the next), I think there's a lot of good contributions worth mention. (Not including poems, because I haven't read many of them.)

"Barnaby in Exile"—Mike Resnick
"Selkies"—Mary Rosenblum
"Via Roma"—Robert Silverberg
"Nekropolis"—Maureen F. McHugh
"Messenger"—Andrew Weiner
"The Fragrance of Orchids"—Sally McBride
"The Mermaid's Comb"—Mary Rosenblum
"The Madonna of Port Lligat"—Steven R. Boyett
"Out of the Quiet Years"—G. David Nordley
"Cilia-of-Gold"—Stephen Baxter
"Bernie"—Ian McDowell
"Soft Rain"—Valerie J. Freireich
"Cri de Coeur"—Michael Bishop
"Digital Music"—Alan Gordon

I just went through the table of contents of all the issues in order; it's nice to note that there still are some magazines out there with something to actually *read*, and not so much commercialization.

I'm not going to note each of these (I'm wasting enough time for the both of us . . . but hey, it's a lot of reading), but there are some exceptional stories on this list.

Mary Rosenblum is an extremely talented writer, a keeper, don't let her out of your sight. I liked "Via Roma," but any deeper meaning in Silverberg's novella wasn't super-apparent, maybe I

should have looked harder.

"Nekropolis," "The Fragrance of Orchids," and "The Mermaid's Comb" all deal with barriers between people, and other life forms that basically act like people (whether it be a harni, an alien, or a selkie). Each takes their own distinct route, of course, but I think literature should focus a little more on understanding between people, empathy. These three do, in distinct styles and basic messages.

"The Madonna of Port Lligat" was extremely imaginative, and I think the basic message of Il Divino is an important one: don't love death, or the many realities of the world today; just acknowledge it in your works. It's a piece of life just as anything else, a color on my palette.

"Cilia-of-Gold" is the type of story one first thinks of when one thinks SF. It's got a lot of theories, it's in outer space, it's weird, but not super-duper weird, and having a science course or two in college wouldn't hurt a bit. "Cilia-of-Gold" was imaginative, entertaining, surprising (I didn't think *anything* could ever live on Mercury, now it doesn't sound so unlikely), yet lacked a message.

Don't write a lot of lines just to write a lot of lines. Write something between them, if you want to write literature.

"Bernie," on the other hand, is lighter on the theory, but has a rather ironic, satirical message. I really enjoyed that story, with Bernie wearing Mickey Mouse gloves, and wearing huge Nikes. Rather than looking like a goofy children's show dino, the untamed beauty of Mother Nature still clearly shows.

"Soft Rain" was one of your many short, thought-provoking "what if" stories. Conflict was what made this story come alive, the last thought somehow representative of what always seems to happen in life: " 'Desecration of the cross,' de Montevideo said, his voice trembling. He moved warily closer to Juan, and when the *indio* did nothing, he slapped him hard against the mouth. 'And Fray Bartolome said you were a good man.' "

I won't say anything about "Cri de Coeur," just that it's an excellent novella, leaving one short of words. It's no wonder this guy got a movie contract. This is what I mean about having some theory, but also having a message, lines between the lines you write.

My only complaint is that I don't speak French, so I don't have the faintest idea what "cri" means. My father said "Coeur" means "heart," and I knew "de" from my studies of Spanish. "Something of Heart," by Michael Bishop. Oh, well.

In any event, I suppose I'll end here. Thanks for reading whatever you read, have a nice day, and all that.

Kim Burkhalter
409 Briarwood Lane
Port Washington, WI 53074-1341

Thanks for taking the time to let us know your thoughts on these stories. According to my Webster's New World Dictionary, *"Cri de Coeur" means "Cry from the heart . . . an impassioned protest, complaint."*

—Sheila Williams

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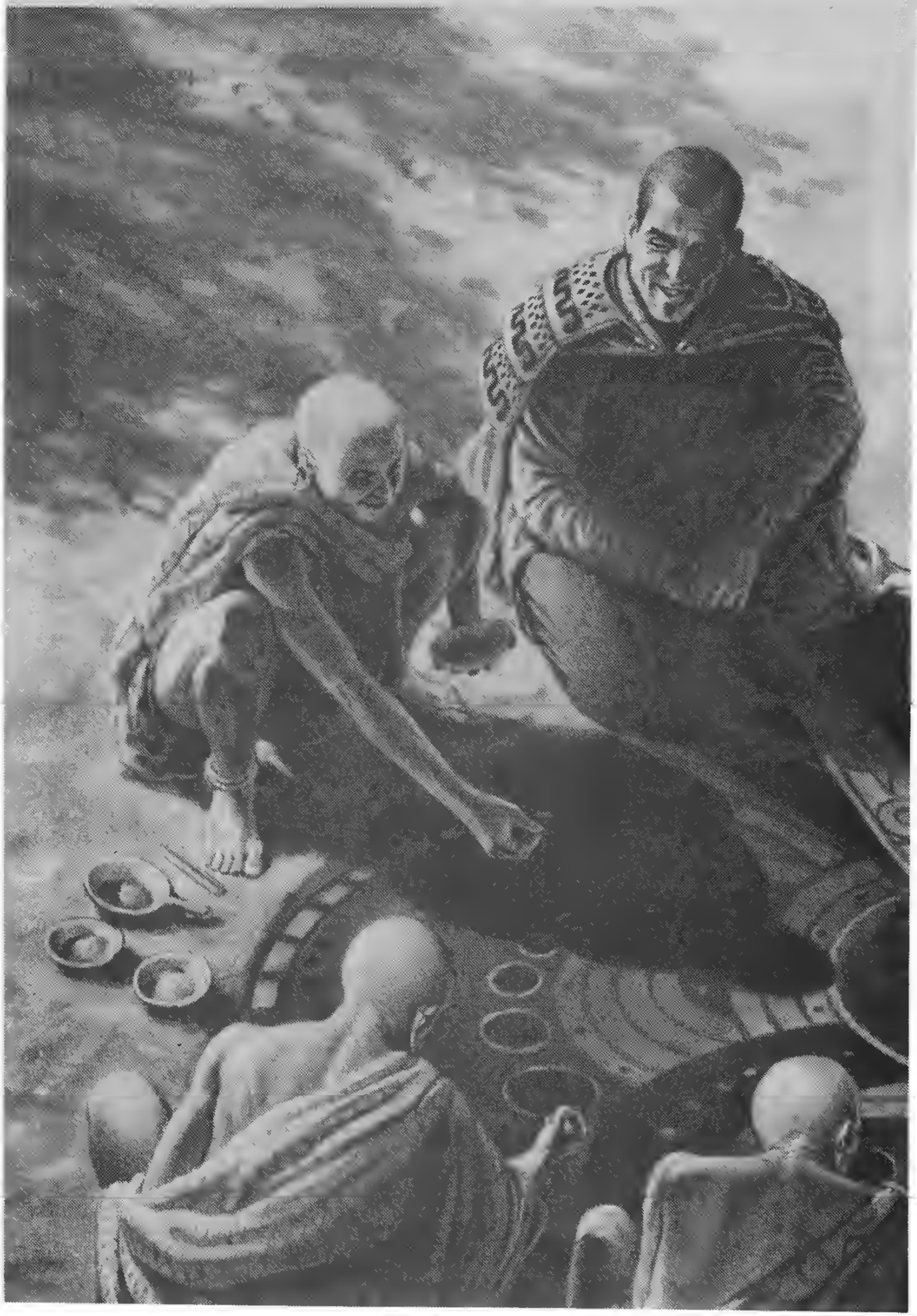
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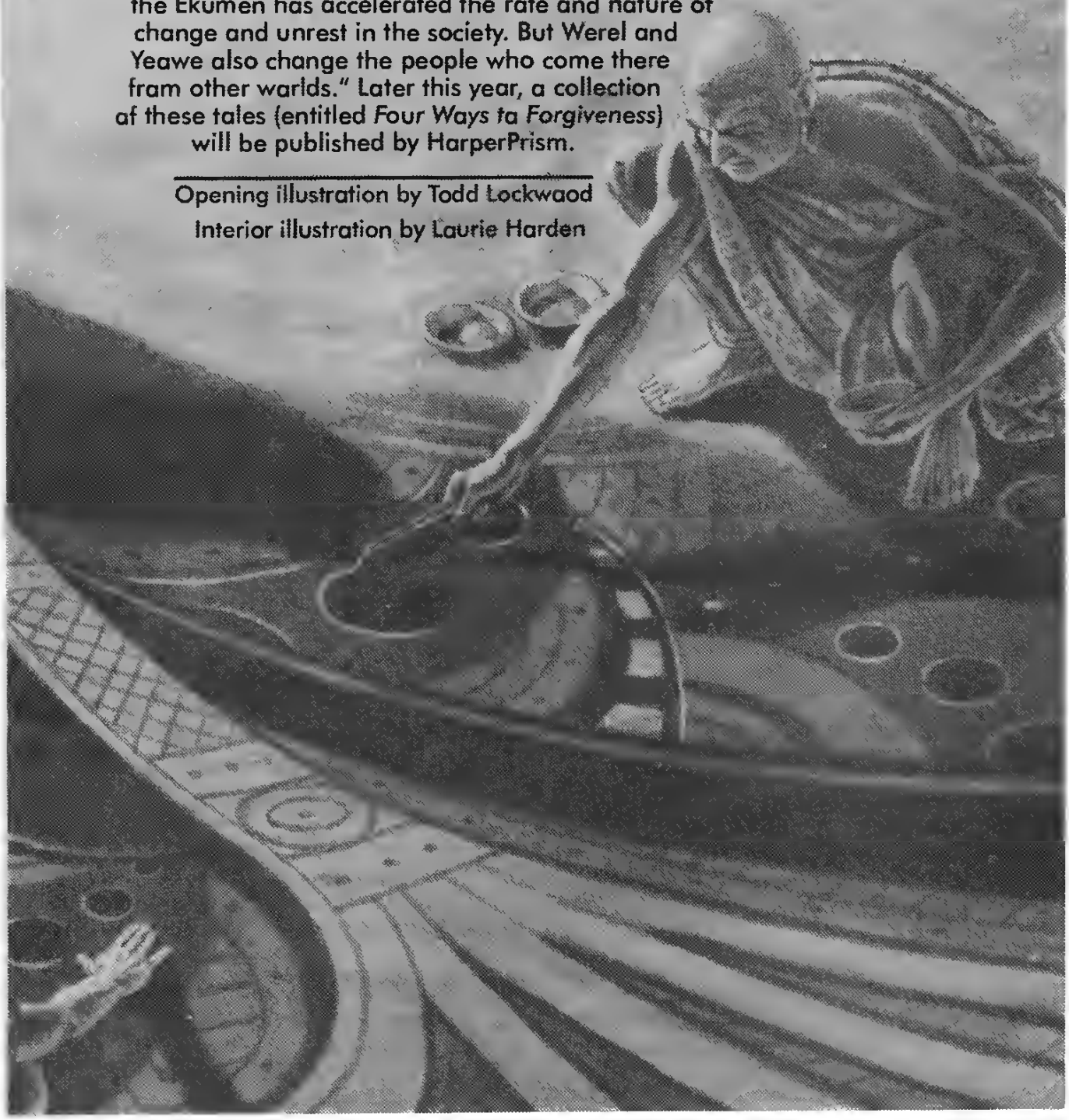
Ursula K. Le Guin

A MAN OF THE PEOPLE

"A Man of the People" is part of a series of tales that includes "Fargiveness Day" (Navember 1994) and "A Woman's Liberation" (which is currently scheduled for our July 1995 issue). Ms. Le Guin tells us they are three-faurths af "a quartet af stories set in a capitalistic slave society on the planet Werel and its colony planet Yeawe. Contact with other warlds belanging to the Ekumen has accelerated the rate and nature of change and unrest in the society. But Werel and Yeawe also change the people who come there fram other warlds." Later this year, a collection af these tales (entitled *Four Ways ta Forgiveness*) will be published by HarperPrism.

Opening illustration by Todd Lockwaod

Interior illustration by Laurie Harden



He sat beside his father by the great irrigation tank. Fire-colored wings soared and dipped through the twilight air. Trembling circles enlarged, interlocked, faded on the still surface of the water. "What makes the water go that way?" he asked, softly because it was mysterious, and his father answered softly, "It's where the araha touch it when they drink." So he understood that in the center of each circle was a desire, a thirst. Then it was time to go home, and he ran before his father, pretending he was an araha flying, back through the dusk into the steep, bright-windowed town.

His name was Mattinyehedarheddyuragamuruskets Havzhiva. The word havzhiva means "ringed pebble," a small stone with a quartz inclusion running through it that shows as a stripe round it. The people of Stse are particular about stones and names. Boys of the Sky, the Other Sky, and the Static Interference lineages are traditionally given the names of stones or desirable manly qualities such as courage, patience, and grace. The Yehedarhed family were traditionalists, strong on family and lineage. "If you know who your people are, you know who you are," said Havzhiva's father, Granite. A kind, quiet man who took his paternal responsibility seriously, he spoke often in sayings.

Granite was Havzhiva's mother's brother, of course; that is what a father was. The man who had helped his mother conceive Havzhiva lived on a farm; he stopped in sometimes to say hello when he was in town. Havzhiva's mother was the Heir of the Sun. Sometimes Havzhiva envied his cousin Aloe, whose father was only six years older than she was and played with her like a big brother. Sometimes he envied children whose mothers were unimportant. His mother was always fasting or dancing or traveling, had no husband, and rarely slept at home. It was exciting to be with her, but difficult. He had to be important when he was with her. It was always a relief to be home with nobody there but his father and his undemanding grandmother and her sister the Winter Dancekeeper and her husband and whichever Other Sky relatives from farms and other pueblos were visiting at the moment.

There were only two Other Sky households in Stse, and the Yehedarheds were more hospitable than the Doyefarads, so all the relatives came and stayed with them. They would have been hard put to afford it if the visitors hadn't brought all sorts of farm stuff, and if Tovo hadn't been Heir of the Sun. She got paid richly for teaching and for performing the rituals and handling the protocol at other pueblos. She gave all she earned to her family, who spent it all on their relatives and on ceremonies, festivities, celebrations, and funerals.

"Wealth can't stop," Granite said to Havzhiva. "It has to keep going. Like the blood circulating. You keep it, it gets stopped—that's a heart attack. You die."

"Will Hezhe-old-man die?" the boy asked. Old Hezhe never spent anything on a ritual or a relative; and Havzhiva was an observant child.

"Yes," his father answered. "His araha is already dead."

Araha is enjoyment; honor; the particular quality of one's gender, manhood or womanhood; generosity; the savor of good food or wine.

It is also the name of the plumed, fire-colored, quick-flying mammal that Havzhiva used to see come to drink at the irrigation-ponds, tiny flames darting above the darkening water in the evening.

Stse is an almost-island, separated from the mainland of the great south continent by marshes and tidal bogs, where millions of wading birds gather to mate and nest. Ruins of an enormous bridge are visible on the landward side, and another halfsunk fragment of ruin is the basis of the town's boat pier and breakwater. Vast works of other ages encumber all Hain, and are no more and no less venerable or interesting to the Hainish than the rest of the landscape. A child standing on the pier to watch his mother sail off to the mainland might wonder why people had bothered to build a bridge when there were boats and flyers to ride. They must have liked to walk, he thought. I'd rather sail in a boat. Or fly.

But the silver flyers flew over Stse, not landing, going from somewhere else to somewhere else, where historians lived. Plenty of boats came in and out of Stse harbor, but the people of his lineage did not sail them. They lived in the Pueblo of Stse, and did the things that their people and their lineage did. They learned what people needed to learn, and lived their knowledge.

"People have to learn to be human," his father said. "Look at Shell's baby. It keeps saying 'Teach me! Teach me!' "

"Teach me," in the language of Stse, is "aowa."

"Sometimes the baby says 'ngaaaaa,' " Havzhiva observed.

Granite nodded. "She can't speak human words very well yet," he said.

Havzhiva hung around the baby that winter, teaching her to say human words. She was one of his Etsahin relatives, his second cousin once removed, visiting with her mother and her father and his wife. The family watched Havzhiva with approval as he patiently said "baba" and "gogo" to the fat, placid, staring baby. Though he had no sister and thus could not be a father, if he went on studying education with such seriousness he would probably have the honor of being the adopted father of a baby whose mother had no brother.

He also studied at school and in the temple, studied dancing, and studied the local version of soccer. He was a serious student. He was good at soccer but not as good as his best friend, a Buried Cable girl named Iyan Iyan (a traditional name for Buried Cable girls, a sea-bird name). Until they were twelve, boys and girls were educated together and alike. Iyan Iyan was the best soccer player on the children's team. They always had to put her on the other side at half-time so that the score would even out and they could go home for dinner without anybody having lost or won badly. Part of her advantage was that she had got her height very early, but most of it was pure skill.

"Are you going to work at the temple?" she asked Havzhiva as they sat on the porch roof of her house watching the first day of the Enactment

of the Unusual Gods, which took place every eleven years. No unusual things were happening yet, and the amplifiers weren't working well, so the music in the plaza sounded faint and full of static. The two children kicked their heels and talked quietly. "No, I think I'll learn weaving from my father," the boy said.

"Lucky you. Why do only stupid boys get to use looms?" It was a rhetorical question, and Havzhiva paid it no attention. Women were not weavers. Men did not make bricks. Other Sky people did not operate boats but did repair electronic devices. Buried Cable people did not castrate animals but did maintain generators. There were things one could do and things one could not do; one did those things for people and people did those things for one. Coming up on puberty, Iyan Iyan and Havzhiva were making a first choice of their first profession. Iyan Iyan had already chosen to apprentice in house-building and repair, although the adult soccer team would probably claim a good deal of her time.

A globular silver person with spidery legs came down the street in long bounds, emitting a shower of sparks each time it landed. Six people in red with tall white masks ran after it, shouting and throwing speckled beans at it. Havzhiva and Iyan Iyan joined in the shouting and craned from the roof to see it go bounding round the corner toward the plaza. They both knew that this Unusual God was Chert, a young man of the Sky lineage, a goalkeeper for the adult soccer team; they both also knew that it was a manifestation of deity. A god called Zarstsa or Ball-Lighting was using Chert to come into town for the ceremony, and had just bounded down the street pursued by shouts of fear and praise and showers of fertility. Amused and entertained by the spectacle, they judged with some acuteness the quality of the god's costume, the jumping, and the fireworks, and were awed by the strangeness and power of the event. They did not say anything for a long time after the god had passed, but sat dreamily in the foggy sunlight on the roof. They were children who lived among the daily gods. Now they had seen one of the unusual gods. They were content. Another one would come along, before long. Time is nothing to the gods.

At fifteen, Havzhiva and Iyan Iyan became gods together.

Stse people between twelve and fifteen were vigilantly watched; there would be a great deal of grief and deep, lasting shame if a child of the house, the family, the lineage, the people, should change being prematurely and without ceremony. Virginity was a sacred status, not to be carelessly abandoned; sexual activity was a sacred status, not to be carelessly undertaken. It was assumed that a boy would masturbate and make some homosexual experiments, but not a homosexual pairing; adolescent boys who paired off, and those who incurred suspicion of trying to get alone with a girl, were endlessly lectured and hectored and badgered by older men. A grown man who made sexual advances to a virgin of either sex would forfeit his professional status, his religious offices, and his houseright.

Changing being took a while. Boys and girls had to be taught how to recognize and control their fertility, which in Hainish physiology is a matter of personal decision. Conception does not happen: it is performed. It cannot take place unless both the woman and the man have chosen it. At thirteen, boys began to be taught the technique of deliberately releasing potent sperm. The teachings were full of warnings, threats, and scoldings, though the boys were never actually punished. After a year or two came a series of tests of achieved potency, a threshold ritual, frightening, formal, extremely secret, exclusively male. To have passed the tests was of course a matter of intense pride; yet Havzhiva, like most boys, came to his final change of being rites very apprehensive, hiding fear under a sullen stoicism.

The girls had been differently taught. The people of Stse believed that a woman's cycle of fertility made it easy for her to learn when and how to conceive, and so the teaching was easy too. Girls' threshold rituals were celebratory, involving praise rather than shame, arousing anticipation rather than fear. Women had been telling them for years, with demonstrations, what a man wants, how to make him stand up tall, how to show him what a woman wants. During this training, most girls asked if they couldn't just go on practicing with each other, and got scolded and lectured. No, they couldn't. Once they had changed status they could do as they pleased, but everybody must go through "the twofold door" once.

The change of being rites were held whenever the people in charge of them could get an equal number of fifteen-year-old boys and girls from the pueblo and its farms. Often a boy or girl had to be borrowed from one of the related pueblos to even out the number or to pair the lineages correctly. Magnificently masked and costumed, silent, the participants danced and were honored all day in the plaza and in the house consecrated to the ceremony; in the evening they ate a ritual meal in silence; then they were led off in pairs by masked and silent ritualists. Many of them kept their masks on, hiding their fear and modesty in that sacred anonymity.

Because Other Sky people have sex only with Original and Buried Cable people and they were the only ones of those lineages in the group, Iyan Iyan and Havzhiva had known they must be paired. They had recognized each other as soon as the dancing began. When they were left alone in the consecrated room, they took off their masks at once. Their eyes met. They looked away.

They had been kept apart most of the time for the past couple of years, and completely apart for the last months. Havzhiva had begun to get his growth, and was nearly as tall as she was now. Each saw a stranger. Decorous and serious, they approached each other, each thinking, "Let's get it over with." So they touched, and that god entered them, becoming them; the god for whom they were the doorway; the meaning for which they were the word. It was an awkward god at first, clumsy, but became an increasingly happy one.

When they left the consecrated house the next day, they both went to Iyan Iyan's house. "Havzhiva will live here," Iyan Iyan said, as a woman has a right to say. Everybody in her family made him welcome and none of them seemed surprised.

When he went to get his clothes from his grandmother's house, nobody there seemed surprised, everybody congratulated him, an old woman cousin from Etsahin made some embarrassing jokes, and his father said, "You are a man of this house now; come back for dinner."

So he slept with Iyan Iyan at her house, ate breakfast there, ate dinner at his house, kept his daily clothes at her house, kept his dance clothes at his house, and went on with his education, which now had mostly to do with rug-weaving on the power broadlooms and with the nature of the cosmos. He and Iyan Iyan both played on the adult soccer team.

He began to see more of his mother, because when he was seventeen she asked him if he wanted to learn Sun-stuff with her, the rites and protocols of trade, arranging fair exchange with farmers of Stse and bargaining with other pueblos of the lineages and with foreigners. The rituals were learned by rote, the protocols were learned by practice. Havzhiva went with his mother to the market, to outlying farms, and across the bay to the mainland pueblos. He had been getting restless with weaving, which filled his mind with patterns that left no room outside themselves. The travel was welcome, the work was interesting, and he admired Tovo's authority, wit, and tact. Listening to her and a group of old merchants and Sun people maneuvering around a deal was an education in itself. She did not push him; he played a very minor role in these negotiations. Training in complicated business such as Sun-stuff took years, and there were other, older people in training before him. But she was satisfied with him. "You have a knack for persuading," she told him one afternoon as they were sailing home across the golden water, watching the roofs of Stse solidify out of mist and sunset light. "You could inherit the Sun, if you wanted to."

Do I want to? he thought. There was no response in him but a sense of darkening or softening, which he could not interpret. He knew he liked the work. Its patterns were not closed. It took him out of Stse, among strangers, and he liked that. It gave him something to do that he didn't know how to do, and he liked that.

"The woman who used to live with your father is coming for a visit," Tovo said.

Havzhiva pondered. Granite had never married. The women who had borne the children Granite sired both lived in Stse and always had. He asked nothing, a polite silence being the adult way of signifying that one doesn't understand.

"They were young. No child came," his mother said. "She went away after that. She became a historian."

"Ah," Havzhiva said in pure, blank surprise.

He had never heard of anybody who became a historian. It had never occurred to him that a person could become one, any more than a person



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could become a Stse. You were born what you were. You were what you were born.

The quality of his polite silence was desperately intense, and Tovo certainly was not unaware of it. Part of her tact as a teacher was knowing when a question needed an answer. She said nothing.

As their sail slackened and the boat slid in toward the pier built on the ancient bridge foundations, he asked, "Is the historian Buried Cable or Original?"

"Buried Cable," his mother said. "Oh, how stiff I am! Boats are such stiff creatures!" The woman who had sailed them across, a ferrywoman of the Grass lineage, rolled her eyes, but said nothing in defense of her sweet, supple little boat.

"A relative of yours is coming?" Havzhiva said to Iyan Iyan that night.

"Oh, yes, she templed in." Iyan Iyan meant a message had been received in the information center of Stse and transmitted to the recorder in her household. "She used to live in your house, my mother said. Who did you see in Etsahin today?"

"Just some Sun people. Your relative is a historian?"

"Crazy people," Iyan Iyan said with indifference, and came to sit naked on naked Havzhiva and massage his back.

The historian arrived, a little short thin woman of fifty or so called Mezha. By the time Havzhiva met her she was wearing Stse clothing and eating breakfast with everybody else. She had bright eyes and was cheerful but not talkative. Nothing about her showed that she had broken the social contract, done things no woman does, ignored her lineage, become another kind of being. For all he knew she was married to the father of her children, and wove at a loom, and castrated animals. But nobody shunned her, and after breakfast the old people of the household took her off for a returning-traveler ceremony, just as if she were still one of them.

He kept wondering about her, wondering what she had done. He asked Iyan Iyan questions about her till Iyan Iyan snapped at him, "I don't know what she does, I don't know what she thinks. Historians are crazy. Ask her yourself!"

When Havzhiva realized that he was afraid to do so, for no reason, he understood that he was in the presence of a god who was requiring something of him. He went up to one of the sitting holes, rock cairns on the heights above the town. Below him the black tile roofs and white walls of Stse nestled under the bluffs, and the irrigation tanks shone silver among fields and orchards. Beyond the tilled land stretched the long sea marshes. He spent a day sitting in silence, looking out to sea and into his soul. He came back down to his own house and slept there. When he turned up for breakfast at Iyan Iyan's house she looked at him and said nothing.

"I was fasting," he said.

She shrugged a little. "So eat," she said, sitting down by him. After

breakfast she left for work. He did not, though he was expected at the looms.

"Mother of All Children," he said to the historian, giving her the most respectful title a man of one lineage can give a woman of another, "there are things I do not know, which you know."

"What I know I will teach you with pleasure," she said, as ready with the formula as if she had lived here all her life. She then smiled and forestalled his next oblique question. "What was given me I give," she said, meaning there was no question of payment or obligation. "Come on, let's go to the plaza."

Everybody goes to the plaza in Stse to talk, and sits on the steps or around the fountain or on hot days under the arcades, and watches other people come and go and sit and talk. It was perhaps a little more public than Havzhiva would have liked, but he was obedient to his god and his teacher.

They sat in a niche of the fountain's broad base and conversed, greeting people every sentence or two with a nod or a word.

"Why did—" Havzhiva began, and stuck.

"Why did I leave? Where did I go?" She cocked her head, bright-eyed as an araha, checking that those were the questions he wanted answered. "Yes. Well, I was crazy in love with Granite, but we had no child, and he wanted a child. . . . You look like he did then. I like to look at you. . . . So, I was unhappy. Nothing here was any good to me. And I knew how to do everything here. Or that's what I thought."

Havzhiva nodded once.

"I worked at the temple. I'd read messages that came in or came by and wonder what they were about. I thought, all that's going on in the world! Why should I stay here my whole life? Does my mind have to stay here? So I began to talk with some of them in other places in the temple: who are you, what do you do, what is it like there . . .? Right away they put me in touch with a group of historians who were born in the pueblos, who look out for people like me, to make sure they don't waste time or offend a god."

This language was completely familiar to Havzhiva, and he nodded again, intent.

"I asked them questions. They asked me questions. Historians have to do a lot of that. I found out they have schools, and asked if I could go to one. Some of them came here and talked to me and my family and other people, finding out if there would be trouble if I left. Stse is a conservative pueblo. There hadn't been a historian from here for four hundred years."

She smiled; she had a quick, catching smile, but the young man listened with unchanging, intense seriousness. Her look rested on his face tenderly.

"People here were upset, but nobody was angry. So after they talked about it, I left with those people. We flew to Kathhad. There's a school

there. I was twenty-two. I began a new education. I changed being. I learned to be a historian."

"How?" he asked, after a long silence.

She drew a long breath. "By asking hard questions," she said. "Like you're doing now . . . . And by giving up all the knowledge I had—throwing it away."

"How?" he asked again, frowning. "Why?"

"Like this. When I left, I knew I was a Buried Cable woman. When I was there, I had to unknow that knowledge. There, I'm not a Buried Cable woman. I'm a woman. I can have sex with any person I choose. I can take up any profession I choose. Lineage matters, here. It does not matter, there. It has meaning here, and a use. It has no meaning and no use, anywhere else in the universe." She was as intense as he, now. "There are two kinds of knowledge, local and universal. There are two kinds of time, local and historical."

"Are there two kinds of gods?"

"No," she said. "There are no gods there. The gods are here."

She saw his face change.

She said after a while, "There are souls, there. Many, many souls, minds, minds full of knowledge and passion. Living and dead. People who lived on this earth a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand years ago. Minds and souls of people from worlds a hundred light-years from this one, all of them with their own knowledge, their own history. The world is sacred, Havzhiva. The cosmos is sacred. That's not a knowledge I ever had to give up. All I learned, here and there, only increased it. There's nothing that is not sacred." She spoke slowly and quietly, the way most people talked in the pueblo. "You can choose the local sacredness or the great one. In the end they're the same. But not in the life one lives. 'To know there is a choice is to have to make the choice: change or stay: river or rock.' The Peoples are the rock. The historians are the river."

After a while he said, "Rocks are the river's bed."

She laughed. Her gaze rested on him again, appraising and affectionate. "So I came home," she said. "For a rest."

"But you're not—you're no longer a woman of your lineage?"

"Yes; here. Still. Always."

"But you've changed being. You'll leave again."

"Yes," she said decisively. "One can be more than one kind of being. I have work to do, there."

He shook his head, slower, but equally decisive. "What good is work without the gods? It makes no sense to me, Mother of All Children. I don't have the mind to understand."

She smiled at the double meaning. "I think you'll understand what you choose to understand, Man of my People," she said, addressing him formally to show that he was free to leave when he wanted.

He hesitated, then took his leave. He went to work, filling his mind and world with the great repeated patterns of the broadloom rugs.

That night he made it up to Iyan Iyan so ardently that she was left spent and a bit amazed. The god had come back to them burning, consuming.

"I want a child," Havzhiva said as they lay melded, sweated together, arms and legs and breasts and breath all mingled in the musky dark.

"Oh," Iyan Iyan sighed, not wanting to talk, decide, resist. "Maybe . . . Later . . . Soon . . ."

"Now," he said, "now."

"No," she said softly. "Hush."

He was silent. She slept.

More than a year later, when they were nineteen, Iyan Iyan said to him before he put out the light, "I want a baby."

"It's too soon."

"Why? My brother's nearly thirty. And his wife would like a baby around. After it's weaned I'll come sleep with you at your house. You always said you'd like that."

"It's too soon," he repeated. "I don't want it."

She turned to him, laying aside her coaxing, reasonable tone. "What do you want, Havzhiva?"

"I don't know."

"You're going away. You're going to leave the People. You're going crazy. That woman, that damned witch!"

"There are no witches," he said coldly. "That's stupid talk. Superstition."

They stared at each other, the dear friends, the lovers.

"Then what's wrong with you? If you want to move back home, say so. If you want another woman, go to her. But you could give me my child, first! when I ask you for it! Have you lost your araha?" She gazed at him with tearful eyes, fierce, unyielding.

He put his face in his hands. "Nothing is right," he said. "Nothing is right. Everything I do, I have to do because that's how it's done, but it—it doesn't make sense—there are other ways—"

"There's one way to live rightly," Iyan Iyan said, "that I know of. And this is where I live. There's one way to make a baby. If you know another you can do it with somebody else!" She cried hard after this, convulsively, the fear and anger of months breaking out at last, and he held her to calm and comfort her.

When she could speak, she leaned her head against him and said miserably, in a small, hoarse voice, "To have when you go, Havzhiva."

At that he wept for shame and pity, and whispered, "Yes, yes." But that night they lay holding each other, trying to console each other, till they fell asleep like children.

"I am ashamed," Granite said painfully.

"Did you make this happen?" his sister asked, dry.

"How do I know? Maybe I did. First Mezha, now my son. Was I too stern with him?"

"No, no."

"Too lax, then. I didn't teach him well. Why is he crazy?"

"He isn't crazy, brother. Let me tell you what I think. As a child he always asked why, why, the way children do. I would answer: That's how it is, that's how it's done. He understood. But his mind has no peace. My mind is like that, if I don't remind myself. Learning the Sun-stuff, he always asked, why thus? why this way, not another way? I answered: Because in what we do daily and in the way we do it, we enact the gods. He said: Then the gods are only what we do. I said: That is the truth. But he wasn't satisfied by the truth. He isn't crazy, brother, but he is lame. He can't walk. He can't walk with us. So, if a man can't walk, what should he do?"

"Sit still and sing," Granite said slowly.

"If he can't sit still? He can fly."

"Fly?"

"They have wings for him, brother."

"I am ashamed," Granite said, and hid his face in his hands.

Tovo went to the temple and sent a message to Mezha at Kathhad: "Your pupil wishes to join you." There was some malice in the words. Tovo blamed the historian for upsetting her son's balance, offcentering him till, as she said, his soul was lamed. And she was jealous of the woman who in a few days had outdone the teachings of years. She knew she was jealous and did not care. What did her jealousy or her brother's humiliation matter? What they had to do was grieve.

As the boat for Daha sailed away, Havzhiva looked back and saw Stse: a quilt of a thousand shades of green, the sea marshes, the pastures, fields, hedgerows, orchards; the town clambering up the bluffs above, pale granite walls, white stucco walls, black tile roofs, wall above wall and roof above roof. As it diminished it looked like a sea bird perched there, white and black, a bird on its nest. Above the town the heights of the island came in view, grey-blue moors and high, wild hills fading into the clouds, white skeins of marsh birds flying.

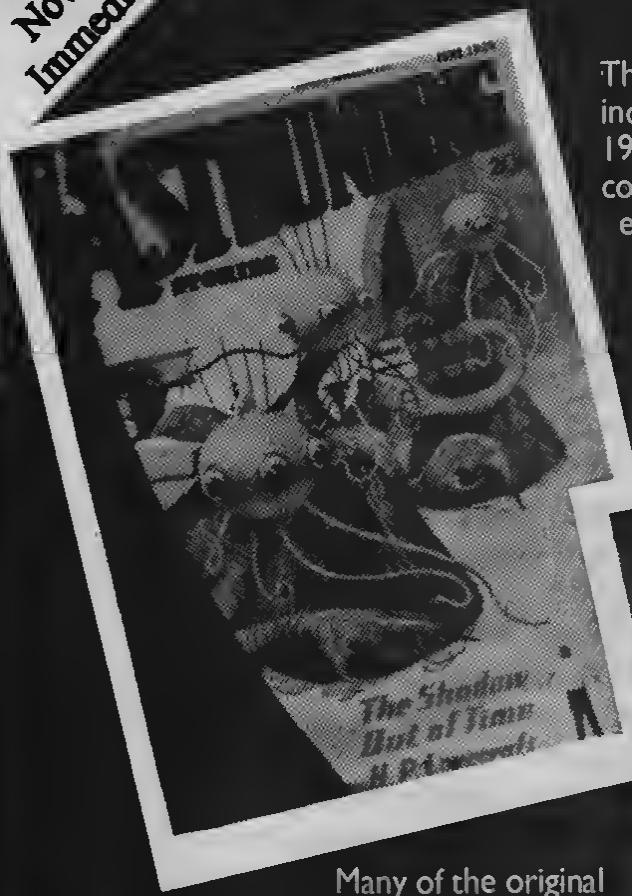
At the port in Daha, though he was farther from Stse than he had ever been and people had a strange accent, he could understand them and read the signs. He had never seen signs before, but their usefulness was evident. Using them, he found his way to the waiting room for the Kathhad flyer. People were sleeping on the cots provided, in their own blankets. He found an empty cot and lay on it, wrapped in the blanket Granite had woven for him years ago. After a short, strange night, people came in with fruit and hot drinks. One of them gave Havzhiva his ticket. None of the passengers knew anyone else; they were all strangers; they kept their eyes down. Announcements were made, and they all went outside and went into the machine, the flyer.

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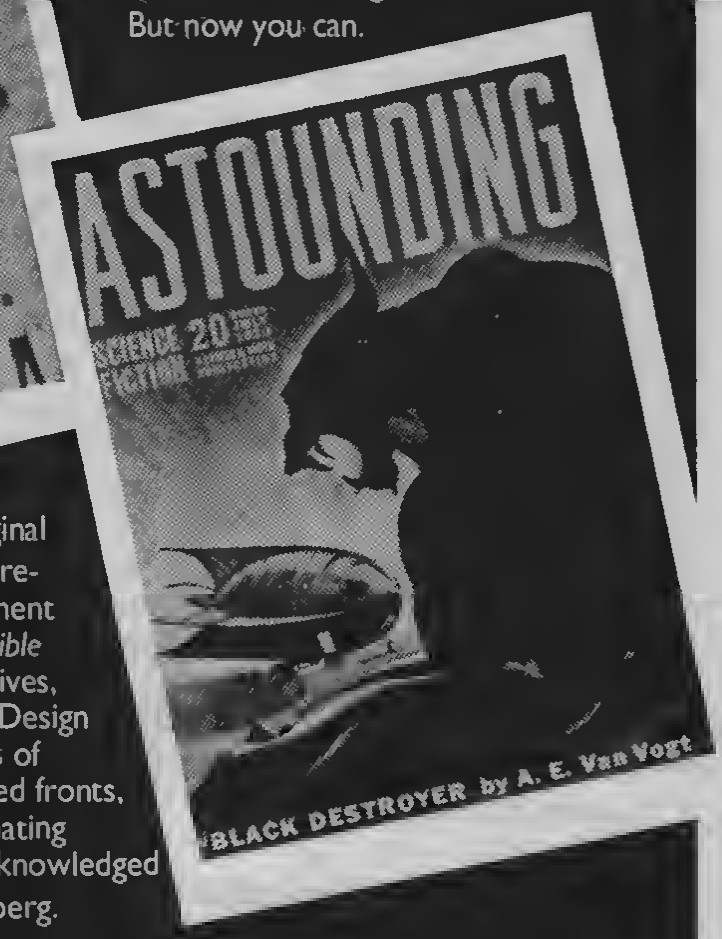
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Havzhiva made himself look at the world as it fell out from under him. He whispered the Staying Chant soundlessly, steadily. The stranger in the seat next to him joined in.

When the world began to tilt and rush up toward him he shut his eyes and tried to keep breathing.

One by one they filed out of the flyer onto a flat, black place where it was raining. Mezha came to him through the rain, saying his name. "Havzhiva, Man of my People, welcome! Come on. There's a place for you at the School."

2. Kathhad and Ve

By the third year at Kathhad Havzhiva knew a great many things that distressed him. The old knowledge had been difficult but not distressing. It had been all paradox and myth, and it had made sense. The new knowledge was all fact and reason, and it made no sense.

For instance, he knew now that historians did not study history. No human mind could encompass the history of Hain: three million years of it. The events of the first two million years, the Fore-Eras, like layers of metamorphic rock, were so compressed, so distorted by the weight of the succeeding millennia and their infinite events that one could reconstruct only the most sweeping generalities from the tiny surviving details. And if one did chance to find some miraculously preserved document from a thousand millennia ago, what then? A king ruled in Azbahan; the Empire fell to the Infidels; a fusion rocket has landed on Ve. . . . But there had been uncountable kings, empires, inventions, billions of lives lived in millions of countries, monarchies, democracies, oligarchies, anarchies, ages of chaos and ages of order, pantheon upon pantheon of gods, infinite wars and times of peace, incessant discoveries and forgettings, innumerable horrors and triumphs, an endless repetition of unceasing novelty. What is the use trying to describe the flowing of a river at any one moment, and then at the next moment, and then at the next, and the next, and the next? You wear out. You say: There is a great river, and it flows through this land, and we have named it History.

To Havzhiva the knowledge that his life, any life was one flicker of light for one moment on the surface of that river was sometimes distressing, sometimes restful.

What the historians mostly did was explore, in an easy and unhurried fashion, the local reach and moment of the river. Hain itself had been for several thousand years in an unexciting period marked by the coexistence of small, stable, self-contained societies, currently called pueblos, with a high-technology, low-density network of cities and information centers, currently called the temple. Many of the people of the temple, the historians, spent their lives traveling to and gathering knowledge about the other inhabited planets of the nearby Orion Arm, colonized by

their ancestors a couple of million years ago during the Fore-Eras. They acknowledged no motive in these contacts and explorations other than curiosity and fellow-feeling. They were getting in touch with their long-lost relatives. They called that greater network of worlds by an alien word, Ekumen, which meant "the household."

By now Havzhiva knew that everything he had learned in Stse, all the knowledge he had had, could be labeled: *typical pueblo culture of northwestern coastal South Continent.* He knew that the beliefs, practices, kinship systems, technologies, and intellectual organizing patterns of the different pueblos were entirely different one from another, wildly different, totally bizarre—just as bizarre as the system of Stse—and he knew that such systems were to be met with on every Known World that contained human populations living in small, stable groups with a technology adapted to their environment, a low, constant birth rate, and a political life based on consent.

At first such knowledge had been intensely distressing. It had been painful. It had made him ashamed and angry. First he thought the historians kept their knowledge from the pueblos, then he thought the pueblos kept knowledge from their own people. He accused; his teachers mildly denied. No, they said. You were taught that certain things were true, or necessary; and those things are true and necessary. They are the local knowledge of Stse.

They are childish, irrational beliefs! he said. They looked at him, and he knew he had said something childish and irrational.

Local knowledge is not partial knowledge, they said. There are different ways of knowing. Each has its own qualities, penalties, rewards. Historical knowledge and scientific knowledge are a way of knowing. Like local knowledge, they must be learned. The way they know in the Household isn't taught in the pueblos, but it wasn't hidden from you, by your people or by us. Everybody anywhere on Hain has access to all the information in the temple.

This was true; he knew it to be true. He could have found out for himself, on the screens of the temple of Stse, what he was learning now. Some of his fellow students from other pueblos had indeed taught themselves how to learn from the screens, and had entered history before they ever met a historian.

Books, however, books that were the body of history, the durable reality of it, barely existed in Stse, and his anger sought justification there. You keep the books from us, all the books in the Library of Hain! No, they said mildly. The pueblos choose not to have many books. They prefer the live knowledge, spoken or passing on the screens, passing from the breath to the breath, from living mind to living mind. Would you give up what you learned that way? Is it less than, is it inferior to what you've learned here from books? There's more than one kind of knowledge, said the historians.

By his third year, Havzhiva had decided that there was more than one

kind of people. The pueblans, able to accept that existence is fundamentally arbitrary, enriched the world intellectually and spiritually. Those who couldn't be satisfied with mystery were more likely to be of use as historians, enriching the world intellectually and materially.

Meanwhile he had got quite used to people who had no lineage, no relatives, and no religion. Sometimes he said to himself with a glow of pride, "I am a citizen of all history, of the millions of years of Hainish history, and my country is the whole galaxy!" At other times he felt miserably small, and he would leave his screens or his books and go look for company among his fellow students, especially the young women who were so friendly, so companionable.

At the age of twenty-four Havzhiva, or Zhiv as he was now called, had been at the Ekumenical School on Ve for a year.

Ve, the next planet out from Hain, was colonized eons ago, the first step in the vast Hainish expansion of the Fore-Eras. It has gone through many phases as a satellite or partner of Hainish civilizations; at this period it is inhabited entirely by historians and aliens.

In their current (that is, for at least the past hundred millennia) mood of not tampering, the Hainish have let Ve return to its own norms of coldness, dryness, and bleakness—a climate within human tolerance, but likely to truly delight only people from the Terran Altiplano or the uplands of Chiffewar. Zhiv was out hiking through this stern landscape with his companion, friend, and lover, Tiu.

They had met two years before, in Kathhad. At that point Zhiv had still been reveling in the availability of all women to himself and himself to all women, a freedom that had only gradually dawned on him, and about which Mezha had warned him gently. "You will think there are no rules," she said. "There are always rules." He had been conscious mainly of his own increasingly fearless and careless transgression of what had been the rules. Not all the women wanted to have sex, and not all the women wanted to have sex with men, as he had soon discovered, but that still left an infinite variety. He found that he was considered attractive. And being Hainish was a definite advantage with the alien women.

The genetic alteration that made the Hainish able to control their fertility was not a simple bit of gene-splicing; involving a profound and radical reconstruction of human physiology, it had probably taken up to twenty-five generations to establish—so say the historians of Hain, who think they know in general terms the steps such a transformation must have followed. However the ancient Hainish did it, they did not do it for any of their colonists. They left the peoples of their colony worlds to work out their own solutions to the First Heterosexual Problem. These have been, of course, various and ingenious; but in all cases so far, to avoid conception you have to do something or have done something or take something or use something—unless you have sex with the Hainish.

Zhiv had been outraged when a girl from Beldene asked him if he was

sure he wouldn't get her pregnant. "How do you *know?*" she said. "Maybe I should take a zapper just to be *safe.*" Insulted in the quick of his manhood, he disentangled himself, said, "Maybe it is only safe not to be with me," and stalked out. Nobody else questioned his integrity, fortunately, and he cruised happily on, until he met Tiu.

She was not an alien. He had sought out women from offworld; sleeping with aliens added exoticism to transgression, or, as he put it, was an enrichment of knowledge such as every historian should seek. But Tiu was Hainish. She had been born and brought up in Darranda, as had her ancestors before her. She was a child of the Historians as he was a child of the People. He realized very soon that this bond and division was far greater than any mere foreignness: that their unlikeness was true difference and their likeness was true kinship. She was the country he had left his own country to discover. She was what he sought to be. She was what he sought.

What she had—so it seemed to him—was perfect equilibrium. When he was with her he felt that for the first time in his life he was learning to walk. To walk as she did: effortless, unselfconscious as an animal, and yet conscious, careful, keeping in mind all that might unbalance her and using it as tightrope walkers use their long pole. . . . This, he thought, this is a dweller in true freedom of mind, this is a woman free to be fully human, this perfect measure, this perfect grace.

He was utterly happy when he was with her. For a long time he asked nothing beyond that, to be with her. And for a long time she was wary of him, gentle but distant. He thought she had every right to keep her distance. A pueblo boy, a fellow who couldn't tell his uncle from his father—he knew what he was, here, in the eyes of the ill-natured and the insecure. Despite their vast knowledge of human ways of being, historians retained the vast human capacity for bigotry. Tiu had no such prejudices, but what did he have to offer her? She had and was everything. She was complete. Why should she look at him? If she would only let him look at her, be with her, it was all he wanted.

She looked at him, liked him, found him appealing and a little frightening. She saw how he wanted her, how he needed her, how he had made her into the center of his life and did not even know it. That would not do. She tried to be cold, to turn him away. He obeyed. He did not plead. He stayed away.

But after fifteen days he came to her and said, "Tiu, I cannot live without you," and knowing that he was speaking the plain truth she said, "Then live with me a while." For she had missed the passion his presence filled the air with. Everybody else seemed so tame, so balanced.

Their lovemaking was an immediate, immense, and continual delight. Tiu was amazed at herself, at her obsession with Zhiv, at her letting him pull her out of her orbit so far. She had never expected to adore anybody, let alone to be adored. She had led an orderly life, in which the controls were individual and internal, not social and external as they had been in Zhiv's life in Stse. She knew what she wanted to be and do. There

was a direction in her, a true north, that she would always follow. Their first year together was a series of continual shifts and changes in their relationship, a kind of exciting love-dance, unpredictable and ecstatic. Very gradually, she began to resist the tension, the intensity, the ecstasy. It was lovely but it wasn't right, she thought. She wanted to go on. That constant direction began to pull her away from him again; and then he fought for his life against it.

That was what he was doing, after a long day's hike in the Desert of Asu Asi on Ve, in their miraculously warm Gethenian-made tent. A dry, icy wind moaned among cliffs of crimson stone above them, polished by the endless winds to a shine like lacquer and carved by a lost civilization with lines of some vast geometry.

They might have been brother and sister, as they sat in the glow of the Chabe stove; their red-bronze coloring was the same, their thick, glossy, black hair, their fine, compact body-type. The pueblan decorum and quietness of Zhiv's movements and voice met in her an articulate, quicker, more vivid response.

But she spoke now slowly, almost stiffly.

"Don't force me to choose, Zhiv," she said. "Ever since I started in the Schools I've wanted to go to Terra. Since before. When I was a kid. All my life. Now they offer me what I want, what I've worked for. How can you ask me to refuse?"

"I don't."

"But you want me to put it off. If I do, I may lose the chance forever. Probably not. But why risk it—for one year? You can follow me next year!"

He said nothing.

"If you want to," she added stiffly. She was always too ready to forego her claim on him. Perhaps she had never believed fully in his love for her. She did not think of herself as lovable, as worthy of his passionate loyalty. She was frightened by it, felt inadequate, false. Her self-respect was an intellectual thing. "You make a god of me," she had told him, and did not understand when he replied with happy seriousness, "We make the god together."

"I'm sorry," he said now. "It's a different form of reason. Superstition, if you like. I can't help it, Tiu. Terra is a hundred and forty light-years away. If you go, when you get there, I'll be dead."

"You will not! You'll have lived another year here, you'll be on your way there, you'll arrive a year after I do!"

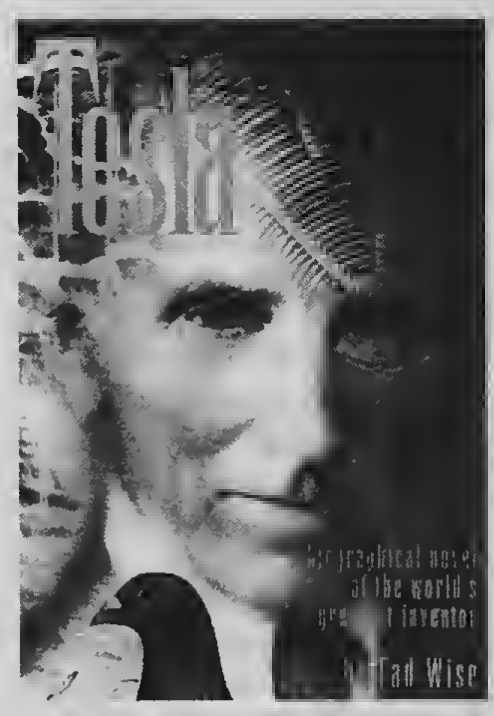
"I know that. Even in Stse we learned that," he said patiently. "But I'm superstitious. We die to each other if you go. Even in Kathhad you learned that."

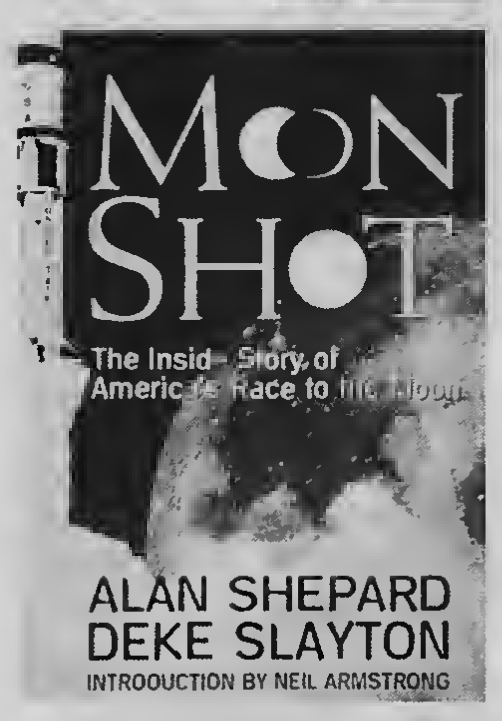
"I didn't. It's not true. How can you ask me to give up this chance for what you admit is a superstition? Be fair, Zhiv!"

After a long silence, he nodded.

She sat stricken, understanding that she had won. She had won badly.

She reached across to him, trying to comfort him and herself. She was





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scared by the darkness in him, his grief, his mute acceptance of betrayal. But it wasn't betrayal—she rejected the word at once. She wouldn't betray him. They were in love. They loved each other. He would follow her in a year, two years at the most. They were adults, they must not cling together like children. Adult relationships are based on mutual freedom, mutual trust. She told herself all these things as she said them to him. He said yes, and held her, and comforted her. In the night, in the utter silence of the desert, the blood singing in his ears, he lay awake and thought, "It has died unborn. It was never conceived."

They stayed together in their little apartment at the School for the few more weeks before Tiu left. They made love cautiously, gently, talked about history and economics and ethnology, kept busy. Tiu had to prepare herself to work with the team she was going with, studying the Terran concepts of hierarchy; Zhiv had a paper to write on social-energy generation on Werel. They worked hard. Their friends gave Tiu a big farewell party. The next day Zhiv went with her to Ve Port. She kissed and held him, telling him to hurry, hurry and come to Terra. He saw her board the flyer that would take her up to the NAFAL ship waiting in orbit. He went back to the apartment on the South Campus of the School. There a friend found him three days later sitting at his desk in a curious condition, passive, speaking very slowly if at all, unable to eat or drink. Being pueblo-born, the friend recognized this state and called in the medicine man (the Hainish do not call them doctors). Having ascertained that he was from one of the Southern pueblos, the medicine man said, "Havzhiva! The god cannot die in you here!"

After a long silence the young man said softly in a voice which did not sound like his voice, "I need to go home."

"That is not possible now," said the medicine man. "But we can arrange a Staying Chant while I find a person able to address the god." He promptly put out a call for students who were ex-People of the South. Four responded. They sat all night with Havzhiva singing the Staying Chant in two languages and four dialects, until Havzhiva joined them in a fifth dialect, whispering the words hoarsely, till he collapsed and slept for thirty hours.

He woke in his own room. An old woman was having a conversation with nobody beside him. "You aren't here," she said. "No, you are mistaken. You can't die here. It would not be right, it would be quite wrong. You know that. This is the wrong place. This is the wrong life. You know that! What are you doing here? Are you lost? Do you want to know the way home? Here it is. Listen." She began singing in a thin, high voice, an almost tuneless, almost wordless song that was familiar to Havzhiva, as if he had heard it long ago. He fell asleep again while the old woman went on talking to nobody.

When he woke again she was gone. He never knew who she was or where she came from; he never asked. She had spoken and sung in his own language, in the dialect of Stse.

He was not going to die now, but he was very unwell. The medicine

man ordered him to the Hospital at Tes, the most beautiful place on all Ve, an oasis where hot springs and sheltering hills make a mild local climate and flowers and forests can grow. There are paths endlessly winding under great trees, warm lakes where you can swim forever, little misty ponds from which birds rise crying, steam-shrouded hot springs, and a thousand waterfalls whose voices are the only sound all night. There he was sent to stay till he was recovered.

He began to speak into his noter, after he had been at Tes twenty days or so; he would sit in the sunlight on the doorstep of his little cottage in a glade of grasses and ferns and talk quietly to himself by way of the little recording machine. "What you select from, in order to tell your story, is nothing less than everything," he said, watching the branches of the old trees dark against the sky. "What you build up your world from, your local, intelligible, rational, coherent world, is nothing less than everything. And so all selection is arbitrary. All knowledge is partial—infinitesimally partial. Reason is a net thrown out into an ocean. What truth it brings in is a fragment, a glimpse, a scintillation of the whole truth. All human knowledge is local. Every life, each human life, is local, is arbitrary, the infinitesimal momentary glitter of a reflection of . . ." His voice ceased; the silence of the glade among the great trees continued.

After forty-five days he returned to the School. He took a new apartment. He changed fields, leaving social science, Tiu's field, for Ekumenical service training, which was intellectually closely related but led to a different kind of work. The change would lengthen his time at the School by at least a year, after which if he did well he could hope for a post with the Ekumen. He did well, and after two years was asked, in the polite fashion of the Ekumenical councils, if he would care to go to Werel. Yes, he said, he would. His friends gave a big farewell party for him.

"I thought you were aiming for Terra," said one of his less astute classmates. "All that stuff about war and slavery and class and caste and gender—isn't that Terran history?"

"It's current events in Werel," Havzhiva said.

He was no longer Zhiv. He had come back from the Hospital as Havzhiva.

Somebody else was stepping on the unastute classmate's foot, but she paid no attention. "I thought you were going to follow Tiu," she said. "I thought that's why you never slept with anybody. God, if I'd only known!" The others winced, but Havzhiva smiled and hugged her apologetically.

In his own mind, it was quite clear. As he had betrayed and forsaken Iyan Iyan, so Tiu had betrayed and forsaken him. There was no going back and no going forward. So he must turn aside. Though he was one of them, he could no longer live with the People; though he had become one of them, he did not want to live with the historians. So he must go live among aliens.

He had no hope of joy. He had bungled that, he thought. But he knew that the two long, intense disciplines that had filled his life, that of the

gods and that of history, had given him an uncommon knowledge, which might be of use somewhere; and he knew that the right use of knowledge is fulfillment.

The medicine man came to visit him the day before he left, checked him over, and then sat for a while saying nothing. Havzhiva sat with him. He had long been used to silence, and still sometimes forgot that it was not customary among historians.

"What's wrong?" the medicine man said. It seemed to be a rhetorical question, from its meditative tone; at any rate, Havzhiva made no answer.

"Please stand up," the medicine man said, and when Havzhiva had done so, "Now walk a little." He walked a few steps; the medicine man observed him. "You're out of balance," he said. "Did you know it?"

"Yes."

"I could get a Staying Chant together this evening."

"It's all right," Havzhiva said. "I've always been off balance."

"There's no need to be," the medicine man said. "On the other hand, maybe it's best, since you're going to Werel. So: Goodbye for this life."

They embraced formally, as historians did, especially when as now it was absolutely certain that they would never see one another again. Havzhiva had to give and get a good many formal embraces that day. The next day he boarded the *Terraces of Darranda* and went across the darkness.

3. Yeowe

During his journey of eighty light-years at NAFAL speed, his mother died, and his father, and Iyan Iyan, everyone he had known in Stse, everyone he knew in Kathhad and on Ve. By the time the ship landed, they had all been dead for years. The child Iyan Iyan had borne had lived and grown old and died.

This was a knowledge he had lived with ever since he saw Tiu board her ship, leaving him to die. Because of the medicine man, the four people who had sung for him, the old woman, and the waterfalls of Tes, he had lived; but he had lived with that knowledge.

Other things had changed as well. At the time he left Ve, Werel's colony planet Yeowe had been a slave world, a huge work camp. By the time he arrived on Werel, the War of Liberation was over, Yeowe had declared its independence, and the institution of slavery on Werel itself was beginning to disintegrate.

Havzhiva longed to observe this terrible and magnificent process, but the Embassy sent him promptly off to Yeowe. A Hainishman called Old Music counseled him before he left. "If you want danger it's dangerous," he said, "and if you like hope it's hopeful. Werel is unmaking itself, while Yeowe's trying to make itself. I don't know if it's going to succeed. I tell you what, Yehedarhed Havzhiva: there are great gods loose on these worlds."

Yeowe had got rid of its Bosses, its Owners, the Four Corporations who had run the vast slave plantations for three hundred years; but though the thirty years of the War of Liberation were over, the fighting had not stopped. Chiefs and warlords among the slaves who had risen to power during the Liberation now fought to keep and extend their power. Factions had battled over the question of whether to kick all foreigners off the planet forever or to admit aliens and join the Ekumen. The isolationists had finally been voted down, and there was a new Ekumenical Embassy in the old colonial capital. Havzhiva spent a while there learning "the language and the table manners," as they said. Then the Ambassador, a clever young Terran named Solly, sent him south to the region called Yotebber, which was clamoring for recognition.

History is infamy, Havzhiva thought as he rode the train through the ruined landscapes of the world.

The Werelian capitalists who colonized the planet had exploited it and their slaves recklessly, mindlessly, in a long orgy of profit-making. It takes a while to spoil a world, but it can be done. Stripmining and single-crop agriculture had defaced and sterilized the earth. The rivers were polluted, dead. Huge dust storms darkened the eastern horizon.

The Bosses had run their plantations by force and fear. For over a century they had shipped male slaves only, worked them till they died, imported fresh ones as needed. Workgangs in these all-male compounds developed into tribal hierarchies. At last, as the price of slaves on Werel and the cost of shipping rose, the Corporations began to buy bondswomen for Yeowe Colony. So over the next two centuries the slave population grew, and slave-cities were founded, "Assetvilles" and "Dustytowns," spreading out from the old compounds of the plantations. Havzhiva knew that the Liberation movement had arisen first among the women in the tribal compounds, a rebellion against male domination, before it became a war of all slaves against their owners.

The slow train stopped in city after city: miles of shacks and cabins, treeless, whole tracts bombed or burnt out in the war and not yet rebuilt; factories, some of them gutted ruins, some functioning but ancient-looking, rattletrap, smoke-belching. At each station hundreds of people got off the train and onto it, swarming, crowding, shouting out bribes to the porters, clambering up onto the roofs of the cars, brutally shoved off again by uniformed guards and policemen. In the north of the long continent, as on Werel, he had seen many blackskinned people, blueblack; but as the train went farther south there were fewer of these, until in Yotebber the people in the villages and on the desolate sidings were much paler than he was, a bluish, dusty color. These were the "dust people," the descendants of a hundred generations of Werelian slaves.

Yotebber had been an early center of the Liberation. The Bosses had made reprisal with bombs and poison gas; thousands of people had died. Whole towns had been burned to get rid of the unburied dead, human and animal. The mouth of the great river had been dammed with rotting bodies. But all that was past. Yeowe was free, a new member of the

Ekumen of the Worlds, and Havzhiva in the capacity of Sub-Envoy was on his way to help the people of Yotebber Region to begin their new history. Or from the point of view of a Hainishman, to rejoin their ancient history.

He was met at the station in Yotebber City by a large crowd surging and cheering and yelling behind barricades manned by policemen and soldiers; in front of the barricades was a delegation of officials wearing splendid robes and sashes of office and variously ornate uniforms: big men, most of them, dignified, very much public figures. There were speeches of welcome, reporters and photographers for the holonet and the neareal news. It wasn't a circus, however. The big men were definitely in control. They wanted their guest to know he was welcome, he was popular, he was—as the Chief said in his brief, impressive speech—the Envoy from the Future.

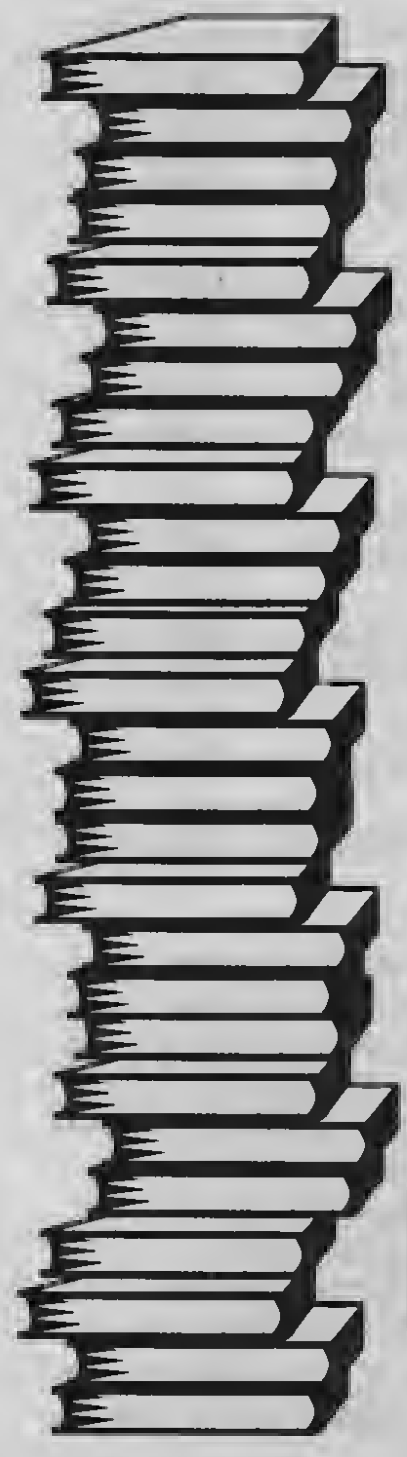
That night in his luxurious suite in an owner's city mansion converted to a hotel, Havzhiva thought: If they knew that their man from the future grew up in a pueblo and never saw a neareal till he came here. . . .

He hoped he would not disappoint these people. From the moment he had first met them on Werel he had liked them, despite their monstrous society. They were full of vitality and pride, and here on Yeowe they were full of dreams of justice. Havzhiva thought of justice what an ancient Terran said of another god: I believe in it because it is impossible. He slept well, and woke early in the warm, bright morning, full of anticipation. He walked out to begin to get to know the city, his city.

The doorman—it was disconcerting to find that people who had fought so desperately for their freedom had servants—the doorman tried hard to get him to wait for a car, a guide, evidently distressed at the great man's going out so early, afoot, without a retinue. Havzhiva explained that he wanted to walk and was quite able to walk alone. He set off, the unhappy doorman calling after him, "Oh, Sir, please avoid the City Park, Sir!"

Havzhiva obeyed, thinking the park must be closed for a ceremony or replanting. He came on a plaza where a market was in full swing, and there found himself likely to become the center of a crowd; people inevitably noticed him. He wore the handsome Yeowan clothes, singlet, breeches, a light narrow robe, but he was the only person with red-brown skin in a city of four hundred thousand people. As soon as they saw his skin, his eyes, they knew him: the Alien. So he slipped away from the market and kept to quiet residential streets, enjoying the soft, warm air and the decrepit, charming colonial architecture of the houses. He stopped to admire an ornate Tualite temple. It looked rather shabby and desolate, but there was, he saw, a fresh offering of flowers at the feet of the image of the Mother at the doorway. Though her nose had been knocked off during the war, she smiled serenely, a little cross-eyed. People called out behind him. Somebody said close to him, "Foreign shit, get off our world," and his arm was seized as his legs were kicked out from

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under him. Contorted faces, screaming, closed in around him. An enormous, sickening cramp seized his body, doubling him into a red darkness of struggle and voices and pain, then a dizzy shrinking and dwindling away of light and sound.

An old woman was sitting by him, whispering an almost tuneless song that seemed dimly familiar.

She was knitting. For a long time she did not look at him; when she did she said, "Ah." He had trouble making his eyes focus, but he made out that her face was bluish, a pale bluish tan, and there were no whites to her dark eyes.

She rearranged some kind of apparatus that was attached to him somewhere, and said, "I'm the medicine woman—the nurse. You have a concussion, a slight skull fracture, a bruised kidney, a broken shoulder, and a knife-wound in your gut; but you'll be all right; don't worry." All this was in a foreign language, which he seemed to understand. At least he understood "don't worry," and obeyed.

He thought he was on the *Terraces of Darranda* in NAFAL mode. A hundred years passed in a bad dream but did not pass. People and clocks had no faces. He tried to whisper the Staying Chant and it had no words. The words were gone. The old woman took his hand. She held his hand and slowly, slowly brought him back into time, into local time, into the dim, quiet room where she sat knitting.

It was morning, hot, bright sunlight in the window. The Chief of Yotebber Region stood by his bedside, a tower of a man in white and crimson robes.

"I'm very sorry," Havzhiva said, slowly and thickly because his mouth was damaged. "It was stupid of me to go out alone. The fault was entirely mine."

"The villains have been caught and will be tried in a court of justice," said the Chief.

"They were young men," Havzhiva said. "My ignorance and folly caused the incident—"

"They will be punished," the Chief said.

The day nurses always had the holoscreen up and watched the news and the dramas as they sat with him. They kept the sound down, and Havzhiva could ignore it. It was a hot afternoon; he was watching faint clouds move slowly across the sky, when the nurse said, using the formal address to a person of high status, "Oh, quick—if the gentleman will look, he can see the punishment of the bad men who attacked him!"

Havzhiva obeyed. He saw a thin human body suspended by the feet, the arms and hands twitching, the intestines hanging down over the chest and face. He cried out aloud and hid his face in his arm. "Turn it off," he said, "turn it off!" He retched and gasped for air. "You are not people!" he cried in his own language, the dialect of Stse. There was some coming and going in the room. The noise of a yelling crowd ceased

abruptly. He got control of his breath and lay with his eyes shut, repeating one phrase of the Staying Chant over and over until his mind and body began to steady and find a little balance somewhere, not much.

They came with food; he asked them to take it away.

The room was dim, lit only by a night light somewhere low on the wall and the lights of the city outside the window. The old woman, the night nurse, was there, knitting in the half dark.

"I'm sorry," Havzhiva said at random, knowing he didn't know what he had said to them.

"Oh, Mr. Envoy," the old woman said with a long sigh. "I read about your people. The Hainish people. You don't do things like we do. You don't torture and kill each other. You live in peace. I wonder, I wonder what we seem to you. Like witches, like devils, maybe."

"No," he said, but he swallowed down another wave of nausea.

"When you feel better, when you're stronger, Mr. Envoy, I have a thing I want to speak to you about." Her voice was quiet and full of an absolute, easy authority, which probably could become formal and formidable. He had known people who talked that way all his life.

"I can listen now," he said, but she said, "Not now. Later. You are tired. Would you like me to sing?"

"Yes," he said, and she sat and knitted and sang voicelessly, tunelessly, in a whisper. The names of her gods were in the song: Tual, Kamye. They are not my gods, he thought, but he closed his eyes and slept, safe in the rocking balance.

Her name was Yeron, and she was not old. She was forty-seven. She had been through a thirty-year war and several famines. She had artificial teeth, something Havzhiva had never heard of, and wore eyeglasses with wire frames; body mending was not unknown on Werel, but on Yeowe most people couldn't afford it, she said. She was very thin, and her hair was thin. She had a proud bearing, but moved stiffly from an old wound in the left hip. "Everybody, everybody in this world has a bullet in them, or whipping scars, or a leg blown off, or a dead baby in their heart," she said. "Now you're one of us, Mr. Envoy. You've been through the fire."

He was recovering well. There were five or six medical specialists on his case. The Regional Chief visited every few days and sent officials daily. The Chief was, Havzhiva realized, grateful. The outrageous attack on a representative of the Ekumen had given him the excuse and strong popular support for a strike against the die-hard isolationist World Party led by his rival, another warlord hero of the Liberation. He sent glowing reports of his victories to the Sub-Envoy's hospital room. The holonews was all of men in uniforms running, shooting, flyers buzzing over desert hills. As he walked the halls, gaining strength, Havzhiva saw patients lying in bed in the wards wired in to the neareal net, "experiencing" the fighting, from the point of view, of course, of the ones with guns, the ones with cameras, the ones who shot.

At night the screens were dark, the nets were down, and Yeron came and sat by him in the dim light from the window.

"You said there was something you had to tell me," he said. The city night was restless, full of noises, music, voices down in the street below the window she had opened wide to let in the warm, many-scented air.

"Yes, I did." She put her knitting down. "I am your nurse, Mr. Envoy, but also a messenger. When I heard you'd been hurt, forgive me, but I said, 'Praise the Lord Kamye and the Lady of Mercy!' Because I had not known how to bring my message to you, and now I knew how." Her quiet voice paused a minute. "I ran this hospital for fifteen years. During the war. I can still pull a few strings here." Again she paused. Like her voice, her silences were familiar to him. "I'm a messenger to the Ekumen," she said, "from the women. Women here. Women all over Yeowe. We want to make an alliance with you. . . . I know, the government already did that. Yeowe is a member of the Ekumen of the Worlds. We know that. But what does it mean? To us? It means nothing. Do you know what women are, here, in this world? They are nothing. They are not part of the government. Women made the Liberation. They worked and they died for it just like the men. But they weren't generals, they aren't chiefs. They are nobody. In the villages they are less than nobody, they are work animals, breeding stock. Here it's some better. But not good. I was trained in the Medical School at Besso. I am a doctor, not a nurse. Under the Bosses, I ran this hospital. Now a man runs it. Our men are the owners now. And we're what we always were. Property. I don't think that's what we fought the long war for. Do you, Mr. Envoy? I think what we have is a new liberation to make. We have to finish the job."

After a long silence, Havzhiva asked softly, "Are you organized?"

"Oh, yes. Oh, yes! Just like the old days. We can organize in the dark!" She laughed a little. "But I don't think we can win freedom for ourselves alone by ourselves alone. There has to be a change. The men think they have to be bosses. They have to stop thinking that. Well, one thing we have learned in my lifetime, you don't change a mind with a gun. You kill the boss and you become the boss. We must change that mind. The old slave mind, boss mind. We have got to change it, Mr. Envoy. With your help. The Ekumen's help."

"I'm here to be a link between your people and the Ekumen. But I'll need time," he said. "I need to learn."

"All the time in the world. We know we can't turn the boss mind around in a day or a year. This is a matter of education." She said the word as a sacred word. "It will take a long time. You take your time. If we just know that you will *listen*."

"I will listen," he said.

She drew a long breath, took up her knitting again. Presently she said, "It won't be easy to hear us."

He was tired. The intensity of her talk was more than he could yet handle. He did not know what she meant. A polite silence is the adult way of signifying that one doesn't understand. He said nothing.

She looked at him. "How are we to come to you? You see, that's a problem. I tell you, we are nothing. We can come to you only as your nurse. Your housemaid. The woman who washes your clothes. We don't mix with the chiefs. We aren't on the councils. We wait on table. We don't eat the banquet."

"Tell me—" he hesitated. "Tell me how to start. Ask to see me if you can. Come as you can, as it . . . if it's safe?" He had always been quick to learn his lessons. "I'll listen. I'll do what I can." He would never learn much distrust.

She leaned over and kissed him very gently on the mouth. Her lips were light, dry, soft.

"There," she said, "no chief will give you that."

She took up her knitting again. He was half asleep when she asked, "Your mother is living, Mr. Havzhiva?"

"All my people are dead."

She made a little soft sound. "Bereft," she said. "And no wife?"

"No."

"We will be your mothers, your sisters, your daughters. Your people. I kissed you for that love that will be between us. You will see."

"The list of the persons invited to the reception, Mr. Yehedarhed," said Doranden, the Chief's chief liaison to the Sub-Envoy.

Havzhiva looked through the list on the handscreen carefully, ran it past the end, and said, "Where is the rest?"

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Envoy—are there omissions? This is the entire list."

"But these are all men."

In the infinitesimal silence before Doranden replied, Havzhiva felt the balance of his life poised.

"You wish the guests to bring their wives? Of course! If this is the Ekumenical custom, we shall be delighted to invite the ladies!"

There was something lipsmacking in the way Yeowan men said "the ladies," a word which Havzhiva had thought was applied only to women of the owner class on Werel. The balance dipped. "What ladies?" he asked, frowning. "I'm talking about women. Do they have no part in this society?"

He became very nervous as he spoke, for he now knew his ignorance of what constituted danger here. If a walk on a quiet street could be nearly fatal, embarrassing the Chief's liaison might be completely so. Doranden was certainly embarrassed—floored. He opened his mouth and shut it.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Doranden," Havzhiva said, "please pardon my poor efforts at jocosity. Of course I know that women have all kinds of responsible positions in your society. I was merely saying, in a stupidly unfortunate manner, that I should be very glad to have such women and their husbands, as well as the wives of these guests, attend the reception. Unless I am truly making an enormous blunder concerning your customs? I thought you did not segregate the sexes socially, as they do on

Werel. Please, if I was wrong, be so kind as to excuse the ignorant foreigner once again."

Loquacity is half of diplomacy, Havzhiva had already decided. The other half is silence.

Doranden availed himself of the latter option, and with a few earnest reassurances got himself away. Havzhiva remained nervous until the following morning, when Doranden reappeared with a revised list containing eleven new names, all female. There was a school principal and a couple of teachers; the rest were marked "retired."

"Splendid, splendid!" said Havzhiva. "May I add one more name?"—Of course, of course, anyone your excellency desires—"Dr. Yeron," he said.

Again the infinitesimal silence, the grain of dust dropping on the scales. Doranden knew that name. "Yes," he said.

"Dr. Yeron nursed me, you know, at your excellent hospital. We became friends. An ordinary nurse might not be an appropriate guest among such very distinguished people; but I see there are several other doctors on our list."

"Quite," said Doranden. He seemed bemused. The Chief and his people had become used to patronizing the Sub-Envoy, ever so slightly and politely. An invalid, though now well recovered; a victim; a man of peace, ignorant of attack and even of self-defense; a scholar, a foreigner, unworldly in every sense: they saw him as something like that, he knew. Much as they valued him as a symbol and as a means to their ends, they thought him an insignificant man. He agreed with them as to the fact, but not as to the quality, of his insignificance. He knew that what he did might signify. He had just seen it.

"Surely *you* understand the reason for having a bodyguard, Envoy," the General said with some impatience.

"This is a dangerous city, General Denkam, yes, I understand that. Dangerous for everyone. I see on the net that gangs of young men, such as those who attacked me, roam the streets quite beyond the control of the police. Every child, every woman needs a bodyguard. I should be distressed to know that the safety that is every citizen's right was my special privilege."

The General blinked but stuck to his guns. "We can't let you get assassinated," he said.

Havzhiva loved the bluntness of Yeowan honesty. "I don't want to be assassinated," he said. "I have a suggestion, sir. There are policewomen, female members of the city police force, are there not? Find me bodyguards from among them. After all, an armed woman is as dangerous as an armed man, isn't she? And I should like to honor the great part women played in winning Yeowe's freedom, as the Chief said so eloquently in his talk yesterday."

The General departed with a face of cast iron.

Havzhiva did not particularly like his bodyguards. They were hard, tough women, unfriendly, speaking a dialect he could hardly understand.

Several of them had children at home, but they refused to talk about their children. They were fiercely efficient. He was well protected. He saw when he went about with these cold-eyed escorts that he began to be looked at differently by the city crowds: with amusement and a kind of fellow-feeling. He heard an old man in the market say, "That fellow has some sense."

Everybody called the Chief the Chief except to his face. "Mr. President," Havzhiva said, "the question really isn't one of Ekumenical principles or Hainish customs at all. None of that is or should be of the least weight, the least importance, here on Yeowe. This is your world."

The Chief nodded once, massively.

"Into which," said Havzhiva, by now insuperably loquacious, "immigrants are beginning to come from Werel now, and many, many more will come, as the Werelian ruling class tries to lessen revolutionary pressure by allowing increasing numbers of the underclass to emigrate. You, sir, know far better than I the opportunities and the problems that this great influx of population will cause here in Yotebber. Now of course at least half the immigrants will be female, and I think it worth considering that there is a very considerable difference between Werel and Yeowe in what is called the construction of gender—the roles, the expectations, the behavior, the relationships of men and women. Among the Werelian immigrants most of the decision-makers, the people of authority, will be female. The Council of the Hame is about nine-tenths women, I believe. Their speakers and negotiators are mostly women. These people are coming into a society governed and represented entirely by men. I think there is the possibility of misunderstandings and conflict, unless the situation is carefully considered beforehand. Perhaps the use of some women as representatives—"

"Among slaves on the Old World," the Chief said, "women were chiefs. Among our people, men are chiefs. That is how it is. The slaves of the Old World will be the free men of the New World."

"And the women, Mr. President?"

"A free man's women are free," said the Chief.

"Well, then," Yeron said, and sighed her deep sigh. "I guess we have to kick up some dust."

"What dust people are good at," said Dobibe.

"Then we better kick up a whole lot," said Tualyan. "Because no matter what we do, they'll get hysterical. They'll yell and scream about castrating dykes who kill boy babies. If there's five of us singing some damn song, it'll get into the neareals as five hundred of us with machine guns and the end of civilization on Yeowe. So I say let's go for it. Let's have five thousand women out singing. Let's stop the trains. Lie down on the tracks. Fifty thousand women lying on the tracks all over Yotebber. You think?"

The meeting (of the Yotebber City and Regional Educational Aid Association) was in a schoolroom of one of the city schools. Two of Havzhiva's bodyguards, in plain clothes, waited unobtrusively in the hall. Forty women and Havzhiva were jammed into small chairs attached to blank netscreens.

"Asking for?" Havzhiva said.

"The secret ballot!"

"No job discrimination!"

"Pay for our work!"

"The secret ballot!"

"Child care!"

"The secret ballot!"

"Respect!"

Havzhiva's noter scribbled away madly. The women went on shouting for a while and then settled down to talk again.

One of the bodyguards spoke to Havzhiva as she drove him home. "Sir," she said. "Was those all teachers?"

"Yes," he said. "In a way."

"Be damn," she said. "Different from they used to be."

"Yehedarhed! What the hell are you doing down there?"

"Ma'am?"

"You were on the news. Along with about a million women lying across railroad tracks and all over flyer pads and draped around the President's Residence. You were talking to women and smiling."

"It was hard not to."

"When the Regional Government begins shooting, will you stop smiling?"

"Yes. Will you back us?"

"How?"

"Words of encouragement to the women of Yotebber from the Ambassador of the Ekumen. Yeowe a model of true freedom for immigrants from the Slave World. Words of praise to the Government of Yotebber—Yotebber a model for all Yeowe of restraint, enlightenment, et cetera."

"Sure. I hope it helps. Is this a revolution, Havzhiva?"

"It is education, ma'am."

The gate stood open in its massive frame; there were no walls.

"In the time of the Colony," the elder said, "this gate was opened twice in the day: to let the people out to work in the morning, to let the people in from work in the evening. At all other times it was locked and barred." He displayed the great broken lock that hung on the outer face of the gate, the massive bolts rusted in their hasps. His gesture was solemn, measured, like his words, and again Havzhiva admired the dignity these people had kept in degradation, the stateliness they had maintained in, or against, their enslavement. He had begun to appreciate the immense influence of their sacred text, the *Arkamye,* preserved in oral tradition.

"This was what we had. This was our belonging," an old man in the city had told him, touching the book which, at sixty-five or seventy, he was learning to read.

Havzhiva himself had begun to read the book in its original language. He read it slowly, trying to understand how this tale of fierce courage and abnegation had for three millennia informed and nourished the minds of people in bondage. Often he heard in its cadences the voices he had heard speak that day.

He was staying for a month in Hayaway Tribal Village, which had been the first slave compound of the Agricultural Plantation Corporation of Yeowe in Yotebber, three centuries ago. In this immense, remote region of the eastern coast, much of the society and culture of plantation slavery had been preserved. Yeron and other women of the Liberation Movement had told him that to know who the Yeowans were he must know the plantations and the tribes.

He knew that the compounds had for the first century been a domain of men without women and without children. They had developed an internal government, a strict hierarchy of force and favoritism. Power was won by tests and ordeals and kept by a nimble balancing of independence and collusion. When women slaves were brought in at last, they entered this rigid system as the slaves of slaves. By bondsmen as by bosses, they were used as servants and sexual outlets. Sexual loyalty and partnership continued to be recognized only between men, a nexus of passion, negotiation, status, and tribal politics. During the next centuries the presence of children in the compounds had altered and enriched tribal customs, but the system of male dominance, so entirely advantageous to the slave-owners, had not essentially changed.

"We hope to have your presence at the initiation tomorrow," the Elder said in his grave way, and Havzhiva assured him that nothing could please or honor him more than attendance at a ceremony of such importance. The Elder was sedately but visibly gratified. He was a man over fifty, which meant he had been born a slave and had lived as a boy and man through the years of the Liberation. Havzhiva looked for scars, remembering what Yeron had said, and found them: the Elder was thin, meager, lame, and had no upper teeth; he was marked all through by famine and war. Also he was ritually scarred, four parallel ridges running from neck to elbow over the point of the shoulder like long epaulets, and a dark blue open eye tattooed on his forehead, the sign, in this tribe, of assigned, unalterable chiefdom. A slave chief, a chattel master of chattels, till the walls went down.

The Elder walked on a certain path from the gate to the longhouse, and Havzhiva following him observed that no one else used this path: men, women, children trotted along a wider, parallel road that diverged off to a different entrance to the longhouse. This was the chiefs' way, the narrow way.

That night, while the children to be initiated next day fasted and kept vigil over on the women's side, all the chiefs and elders gathered for a

feast. There were inordinate amounts of the heavy food Yeowans were accustomed to, spiced and ornately served, the marsh rice that was the basis of everything fancied up with coloring and herbs; above all there was meat. Women slipped in and out serving ever more elaborate platters, each one with more meat on it—cattle flesh, Boss food, the sure and certain sign of freedom.

Havzhiva had not grown up eating meat, and could count on it giving him diarrhea, but he chewed his way manfully through the stews and steaks, knowing the significance of the food and the meaning of plenty to those who had never had enough.

After huge baskets of fruit finally replaced the platters, the women disappeared and the music began. The tribal chief nodded to his leos, a word meaning "sexual favorite/adopted brother/not heir/not son." The young man, a self-assured, good-natured beauty, smiled; he clapped his long hands very softly once, then began to brush the grey-blue palms in a subtle rhythm. As the table fell silent he sang, but in a whisper.

Instruments of music had been forbidden on most plantations; most Bosses had allowed no singing except the ritual hymns to Tual at the tenthday service. A slave caught wasting Corporation time in singing might have acid poured down his throat. So long as he could work there was no need for him to make noise.

On such plantations the slaves had developed this almost silent music, the touch and brush of palm against palm, a barely voiced, barely varied, long line of melody. The words sung were deliberately broken, distorted, fragmented, so that they seemed meaningless. *Shesh,* the owners had called it, rubbish, and slaves were permitted to "pat hands and sing rubbish" so long as they did so softly it could not be heard outside the compound walls. Having sung so for three hundred years, they sang so now.

To Havzhiva it was unnerving, almost frightening, as voice after voice joined, always at a whisper, increasing the complexity of the rhythms till the cross-beats nearly, but never quite, joined into a single texture of hushing sibilant sound, threaded by the long-held, quarter-tonal melody sung on syllables that seemed always about to make a word but never did. Caught in it, soon almost lost in it, he kept thinking now—now one of them will raise his voice—now the leos will give a shout of triumph, letting his voice free!—But he did not. None did. The soft, rushing, waterlike music with its infinitely delicate shifting rhythm went on and on. Bottles of the orange Yote wine passed up and down the table. They drank. They drank freely, at least. They got drunk. Laughter and shouts began to interrupt the music. But they never once sang above a whisper.

They all reeled back to the longhouse on the chief's path, embracing, peeing companionably, one or two pausing to vomit here and there. A kind, dark man who had been seated next to Havzhiva now joined him in his bed in his alcove of the longhouse.

Earlier in the evening this man had told him that during the night and day of the initiation heterosexual intercourse was forbidden, as it

would change the energies. The initiation would go crooked, and the boys might not become good members of the tribe. Only a witch, of course, would deliberately break the taboo, but many women were witches and would try to seduce a man out of malice. Regular, that is, homosexual, intercourse would encourage the energies, keep the initiation straight, and give the boys strength for their ordeal. Hence every man leaving the banquet would have a partner for the night. Havzhiva was glad he had been assigned to this man, not to one of the chiefs, whom he found daunting, and who might have expected a properly energetic performance. As it was, as well as he could remember in the morning, he and his companion had been too drunk to do much but fall asleep amidst well-intended caresses.

Too much Yote wine left a ringing headache, he knew that already, and his whole skull reconfirmed the knowledge when he woke.

At noon his friend brought him to a place of honor in the plaza, which was filling up with men. Behind them were the men's longhouses, in front of them the ditch that separated the women's side, the inside, from the men's or gate side—still so called, though the compound walls were gone and the gate alone stood, a monument, towering above the huts and longhouses of the compound and the flat grainfields that stretched away in all directions, shimmering in the windless, shadowless heat.

From the women's huts, six boys came at a run to the ditch. It was wider than a thirteen-year-old could jump, Havzhiva thought; but two of the boys made it. The other four leapt valiantly, fell short, clambered out, one of them hobbling, having hurt a leg or foot in his fall. Even the two who had made the jump successfully looked exhausted and frightened, and all six were bluish-grey from fasting and staying awake. Elders surrounded them and got them standing in line in the plaza, naked and shivering, facing the crowd of all the men of the tribe.

No women at all were visible, over on the women's side.

A catchism began, chiefs and elders barking questions that must evidently be answered without delay, sometimes by one boy, sometimes by all together, depending on the questioner's pointing or sweeping gesture. They were questions of ritual, protocol, and ethics. The boys had been well drilled, delivering their answers in prompt yelps. The one who had lamed himself in the jump suddenly vomited and then fainted, slipping quietly down in a little heap. Nothing was done, and some questions were still pointed to him, followed by a moment of painful silence. After a while the boy moved, sat up, sat a while shuddering, then struggled to his feet and stood with the others. His bluish lips moved in answer to all the questions, though no voice reached the audience.

Havzhiva kept his apparent attention fixed on the ritual, though his mind wandered back a long time, a long way. We teach what we know, he thought, and all our knowledge is local.

After the inquisition came the marking: a single deep cut from the base of the neck over the point of the shoulder and down the outer arm to the elbow, made with a hard, sharp stake of wood dragged gouging

through skin and flesh to leave, when it healed, the furrowed scar that proved the man. Slaves would not have been allowed any metal tools inside the gate, Havzhiva reflected, watching steadily as behooved a visitor and guest. After each arm and each boy, the officiating elders stopped to re-sharpen the stake, rubbing it on a big grooved stone that sat in the plaza. The boys' pale-blue lips drew back, baring their white teeth; they writhed, half-fainting, and one of them screamed aloud, silencing himself by clapping his free hand over his mouth. One bit of his thumb till blood flowed from it as well as from his lacerated arms. As each boy's marking was finished the Tribal Chief washed the wounds and smeared some ointment on them. Dazed and wobbling, the boys stood again in line; and now the old men were tender with them, smiling, calling them "tribesman," "hero." Havzhiva drew a long breath of relief.

But now six more children were being brought into the plaza, led across the ditch-bridge by old women. These were girls, decked with anklets and bracelets, otherwise naked. At the sight of them a great cheer went up from the audience of men. Havzhiva was surprised. Women were to be made members of the tribe too? That at least was a good thing, he thought.

Two of the girls were barely adolescent, the others were younger, one of them surely not more than six. They were lined up, their backs to the audience, facing the boys. Behind each of them stood the veiled woman who had led her across the bridge; behind each boy stood one of the naked elders. As Havzhiva watched, unable to turn his eyes or mind from what he saw, the little girls lay down face up on the bare, greyish ground of the plaza. One of them, slow to lie down, was tugged and forced down by the woman behind her. The old men came around the boys, and each one lay down on one of the girls, to a great noise of cheering, jeering, and laughter and a chant of "ha-ah-ha-ah!" from the spectators. The veiled women crouched at the girls' heads. One of them reached out and held down a thin, flailing arm. The elders' bare buttocks pumped, whether in actual coitus or an imitation Havzhiva could not tell. "That's how you do it, watch, watch!" the spectators shouted to the boys, amid jokes and comments and roars of laughter. The elders one by one stood up, each shielding his penis with curious modesty.

When the last had stood up, the boys stepped forward. Each lay down on a girl and pumped his buttocks up and down, though not one of them, Havzhiva saw, had had an erection. The men around him grasped their own penises, shouting, "Here, try mine!" and cheering and chanting until the last boy scrambled to his feet. The girls lay flat, their legs parted, like little dead lizards. There was a slight, terrible movement toward them in the crowd of men. But the old women were hauling the girls to their feet, yanking them up, hurrying them back across the bridge, followed by a wave of howls and jeers from the audience.

"They're drugged, you know," said the kind, dark man who had shared Havzhiva's bed, looking into his face. "The girls. It doesn't hurt them."

"Yes, I see," said Havzhiva, standing still in his place of honor.

"These ones are lucky, privileged to assist initiation. It's important that girls cease to be virgin as soon as possible, you know. Always more than one man must have them, you know. So that they can't make claims—'this is your son,' 'this baby is the chief's son,' you know. That's all witchcraft. A son is chosen. Being a son has nothing to do with bondswomen's cunts. Bondswomen have to be taught that early. But the girls are given drugs now. It's not like the old days, under the Corporations."

"I understand," Havzhiva said. He looked into his friend's face, thinking that his dark skin meant he must have a good deal of owner blood, perhaps indeed was the son of an owner or a boss. Nobody's son, begotten on a slave woman. A son is chosen. All knowledge is local, all knowledge is partial. In Stse, in the Schools of the Ekumen, in the compounds of Yeowe.

"You still call them bondswomen," he said. His tact, all his feelings were frozen, and he spoke in mere stupid intellectual curiosity.

"No," the dark man said, "no, I'm sorry, the language I learned as a boy—I apologize—"

"Not to me."

Again Havzhiva spoke only and coldly what was in his head. The man winced and was silent, his head bowed.

"Please, my friend, take me to my room now," Havzhiva said, and the dark man gratefully obeyed him.

He talked softly into his noter in Hainish in the dark. "You can't change anything from outside it. Standing apart, looking down, taking the overview, you see the pattern. What's wrong, what's missing. You want to fix it. But you can't patch it. You have to be in it, weaving it. You have to be part of the weaving." This last phrase was in the dialect of Stse.

Four women squatted on a patch of ground on the women's side, which had roused his curiosity by its untrodden smoothness: some kind of sacred space, he had thought. He walked toward them. They squatted gracelessly, hunched forward between their knees, with the indifference to their appearance, the carelessness of men's gaze, that he had noticed before on the women's side. Their heads were shaved, their skin chalky and pale. Dust people, dusties, was the old epithet, but to Havzhiva their color was more like clay or ashes. The azure tinge of palms and soles and wherever the skin was fine was almost hidden by the soil they were handling. They had been talking fast and quietly, but went silent as he came near. Two were old, withered up, with knobby, wrinkled knees and feet. Two were young women. They all glanced sidelong from time to time as he squatted down near the edge of the smooth patch of ground.

On it, he saw, they had been spreading dust, colored earth, making some kind of pattern or picture. Following the boundaries between colors he made out a long pale figure a little like a hand or a branch, and a deep curve of earthen red.



Having greeted them, he said nothing more, but simply squatted there. Presently they went back to what they were doing, talking in whispers to one another now and then.

When they stopped working, he said, "Is it sacred?"

The old women looked at him, scowled, and said nothing.

"You can't see it," said the darker of the young women, with a flashing, teasing smile that took Havzhiva by surprise.

"I shouldn't be here, you mean."

"No. You can be here. But you can't see it."

He rose and looked over the earth-painting they had made with grey and tan and red and umber dust. The lines and forms were in a definite relationship, rhythmical but puzzling.

"It's not all there," he said.

"This is only a little, little bit of it," said the teasing woman, her dark eyes bright with mockery in her dark face.

"Never all of it at once?"

"No," she said, and the others said, "No," and even the old women smiled.

"Can you tell me what the picture is?"

She did not know the word "picture." She glanced at the others; she pondered, and looked up at him shrewdly.

"We make what we know, here," she said, with a soft gesture over the softly colored design. A warm evening breeze was already blurring the boundaries between the colors.

"They don't know it," said the other young woman, ashen-skinned, in a whisper.

"The men?—They never see it whole?"

"Nobody does. Only us. We have it here." The dark woman did not touch her head but her heart, covering her breasts with her long, work-hardened hands. She smiled again.

The old women stood up; they muttered together, one said something sharply to the young women, a phrase Havzhiva did not understand; and they stumped off.

"They don't approve of your talking of this work to a man," he said.

"A city man," said the dark woman, and laughed. "They think we'll run away."

"Do you want to run away?"

She shrugged. "Where to?"

She rose to her feet in one graceful movement and looked over the earth-painting, a seemingly random, abstract pattern of lines and colors, curves and areas.

"Can you see it?" she asked Havzhiva, with that liquid teasing flash of the eyes.

"Maybe someday I can learn to," he said, meeting her gaze.

"You'll have to find a woman to teach you," said the woman the color of ashes.

* * *

"We are a free people now," said the Young Chief, the Son and Heir, the Chosen.

"I haven't yet known a free people," Havzhiva said, polite, ambiguous.

"We won our freedom. We made ourselves free. By courage, by sacrifice, by holding fast to the one noble thing. We are a free people." The Chosen was a strong-faced, handsome, intelligent man of forty. Six gouged lines of scarring ran down his upper arms like a rough mantle, and an open blue eye stared between his eyes, unwinking.

"You are free men," Havzhiva said.

There was a silence.

"Men of the cities do not understand our women," the Chosen said. "Our women do not want a man's freedom. It is not for them. A woman holds fast to her baby. That is the noble thing for her. That is how the Lord Kamye made woman, and the Merciful Tual is her example. In other places it may be different. There may be another kind of woman, who does not care for her children. That may be. Here it is as I have said."

Havzhiva nodded, the deep, single nod he had learned from the Yeowans, almost a bow. "That is so," he said.

The Chosen looked gratified.

"I have seen a picture," Havzhiva went on.

The Chosen was impassive; he might or might not know the word.

"Lines and colors made with earth on earth may hold knowledge in them. All knowledge is local, all truth is partial," Havzhiva said with an easy, colloquial dignity that he knew was an imitation of his mother, the Heir of the Sun, talking to foreign merchants. "No truth can make another truth untrue. All knowledge is a part of the whole knowledge. A true line, a true color. Once you have seen the larger pattern, you cannot go back to seeing the part as the whole."

The Chosen stood like a grey stone. After a while he said, "If we come to live as they live in the cities, all we know will be lost." Under his dogmatic tone was fear and grief.

"Chosen One," Havzhiva said, "you speak the truth. Much will be lost. I know it. The lesser knowledge must be given to gain the greater. And not once only."

"The men of this tribe will not deny our truth," the Chosen said. His unseeing, unwinking central eye was fixed on the sun that hung in a yellow dust-haze above the endless fields, though his own dark eyes gazed downward at the earth.

His guest looked from that alien face to the fierce, white, small sun that still blazed low above the alien land. "I am sure of that," he said.

When he was fifty-five, Stabile Yehedarhed Havzhiva went back to Yotebber for a visit. He had not been there for a long time. His work as Ekumenical Advisor to the Yeowan Ministry of Social Justice had kept him in the north, with frequent trips to the other hemisphere. He had lived for years in the Old Capital with his partner, but often visited the New Capital at the request of a new Ambassador who wanted to draw

on his expertise. His partner—they had lived together for eighteen years, but there was no marriage on Yeowe—had a book she was trying to finish, and admitted that she would like to have the apartment to herself for a couple of weeks while she wrote. "Take that trip south you keep mooning about," she said. "I'll fly down as soon as I'm done. I won't tell any damned politicians where you are. Escape! Go, go, go!"

He went. He had never liked flying, though he had had to do a great deal of it, and so he made the long journey by train. They were good, fast trains, terribly crowded, people at every station swarming and rushing and shouting bribes to the conductors, though not trying to ride the roofs of the cars, not at 130 kmh. He had a private room in a through car to Yotebber City. He spent the long hours in silence watching the landscape whirl by, the reclamation projects, the old wastelands, the young forests, the swarming cities, miles of shacks and cabins and cottages and houses and apartment buildings, sprawling Werel-style compounds with connected houses and kitchen gardens and worksheds, factories, huge new plants; and then suddenly the country again, canals and irrigation tanks reflecting the colors of the evening sky, a bare-legged child walking with a great white ox past a field of shadowy grain. The nights were short, a dark, rocking sweetness of sleep.

On the third afternoon he got off the train in Yotebber City Station. No crowds. No chiefs. No bodyguards. He walked through the hot, familiar streets, past the market, through the City Park. A little bravado, there. Gangs, muggers were still about, and he kept his eyes alert and his feet on the main pathways. On past the old Tualite temple. He had picked up a white flower that had dropped from a shrub in the park. He set it at the Mother's feet. She smiled, looking cross-eyed at her missing nose. He walked on to the big, rambling new compound where Yeron lived.

She was seventy-four and had retired recently from the hospital where she had taught, practiced, and been an administrator for the last fifteen years. She was little changed from the woman he had first seen sitting by his bedside, only she seemed smaller all over. Her hair was quite gone, and she wore a glittering kerchief tied round her head. They embraced hard and kissed, and she stroked him and patted him, smiling irrepressibly. They had never made love, but there had always been a desire between them, a yearning to the other, a great comfort in touch. "Look at that, look at that grey!" she cried, petting his hair, "how beautiful! Come in and have a glass of wine with me! How is your Araha? When is she coming? You walked right across the city carrying that bag? You're still crazy!"

He gave her the gift he had brought her, a treatise on *Certain Diseases of Werel-Yeowe* by a team of Ekumenical medical researchers, and she seized it greedily. For some while she conversed only between plunges into the table of contents and the chapter on berlot. She poured out the pale orange wine. They had a second glass. "You look fine, Havzhiva," she said, putting the book down and looking at him steadily. Her eyes had faded to an opaque bluish darkness. "Being a saint agrees with you."

"It's not that bad, Yeron."

"A hero, then. You can't deny that you're a hero."

"No," he said with a laugh. "Knowing what a hero is, I won't deny it."

"Where would we be without you?"

"Just where we are now. . . ." He sighed. "Sometimes I think we're losing what little we've ever won. This Tualbeda, in Detake Province, don't underestimate him, Yeron. His speeches are pure misogyny and anti-immigrant prejudice, and people are eating it up—"

She made a gesture that utterly dismissed the demagogue. "There is no end to that," she said. "But I knew what you were going to be to us. Right away. When I heard your name, even. I knew."

"You didn't give me much choice, you know."

"Bah. You chose, man."

"Yes," he said. He savored the wine. "I did." After a while he said, "Not many people have the choices I had. How to live, whom to live with, what work to do. Sometimes I think I was able to choose because I grew up where all choices had been made for me."

"So you rebelled, made your own way," she said, nodding.

He smiled. "I'm no rebel."

"Bah!" she said again. "No rebel? You, in the thick of it, in the heart of our movement all the way?"

"Oh yes," he said. "But not in a rebellious spirit. That had to be your spirit. My job was acceptance. To keep an acceptant spirit. That's what I learned growing up. To accept. Not to change the world. Only to change the soul. So that it can be in the world. Be rightly in the world."

She listened but looked unconvinced. "Sounds like a woman's way of being," she said. "Men generally want to change things to suit."

"Not the men of my people," he said.

She poured them a third glass of wine. "Tell me about your people. I was always afraid to ask. The Hainish are so old! so learned! they know so much history, so many worlds! Us here with our three hundred years of misery and murder and ignorance—you don't know how small you make us feel."

"I think I do," Havzhiva said. After a while he said, "I was born in a town called Stse."

He told her about the pueblo, about the Other Sky people, his father who was his uncle, his mother the Heir of the Sun, the rites, the festivals, the daily gods, the unusual gods; he told her about changing being; he told her about the historian's visit, and how he had changed being again, going to Kathhad.

"All those rules!" Yeron said. "So complicated and unnecessary. Like our tribes. No wonder you ran away."

"All I did was go learn in Kathhad what I wouldn't learn in Stse," he said, smiling. "What the rules are. Ways of needing one another. Human ecology. What have we been doing here, all these years, but trying to find a good set of rules—a pattern that makes sense?" He stood up, stretched his shoulders, and said, "I'm drunk. Come for a walk with me."

They went out into the sunny gardens of the compound and walked slowly along the paths between vegetable plots and flowerbeds. Yeron nodded to people weeding and hoeing, who looked up and greeted her by name. She held Havzhiva's arm firmly, with pride. He matched his steps to hers.

"When you have to sit still, you want to fly," he said, looking down at her pale, gnarled, delicate hand on his arm. "If you have to fly, you want to sit still. I learned sitting, at home. I learned flying, with the historians. But I still couldn't keep my balance."

"Then you came here," she said.

"Then I came here."

"And learned?"

"How to walk," he said. "How to walk with my people." ●

DEATH'S A FACE

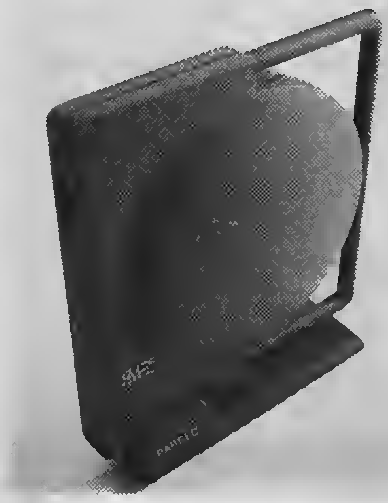
Death's a face you soon forget
however close he breathed in yours.
How sure you were when fear was wet
you never would forget
death's close up grin.

But pictures have a way of drying out,
the color fades and then the line,
and soon the face you thought
you never could forget,
the one you'd spot a decade off
and so escape,
forgets its shape
until you see it close again,
too late. Too late.

—William John Watkins

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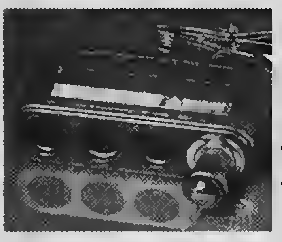
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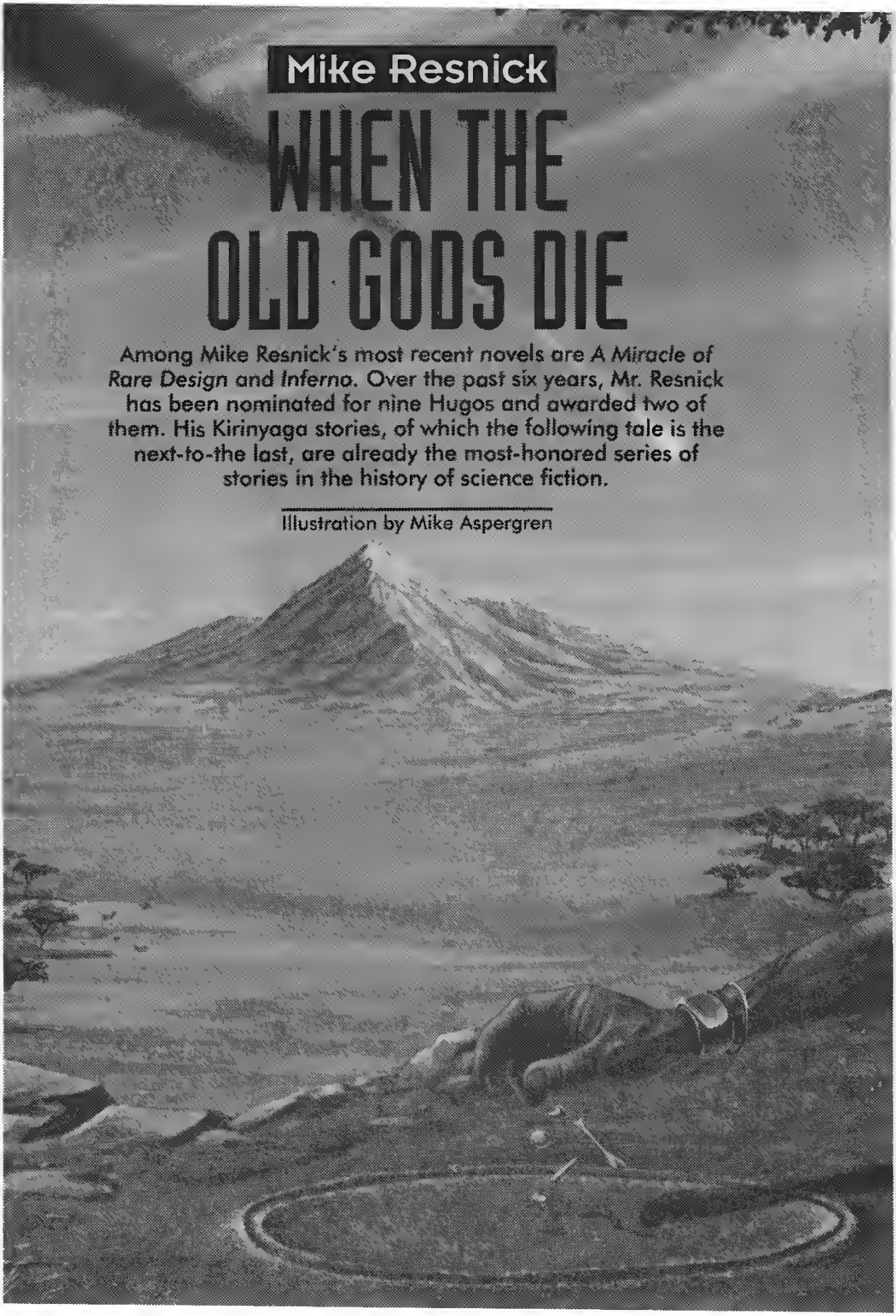
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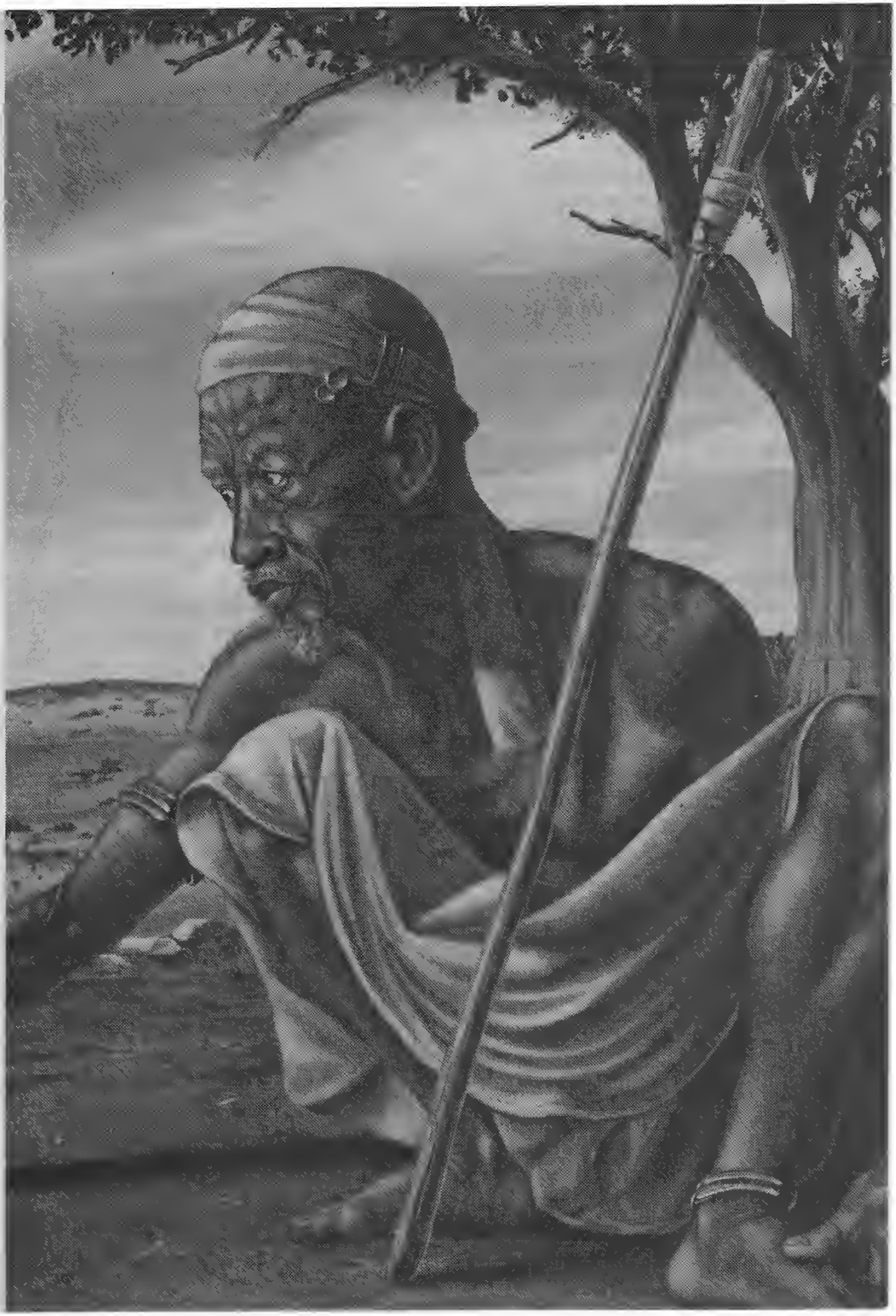
Mike Resnick

WHEN THE OLD GODS DIE

Among Mike Resnick's most recent novels are *A Miracle of Rare Design* and *Inferno*. Over the past six years, Mr. Resnick has been nominated for nine Hugos and awarded two of them. His Kirinyaga stories, of which the following tale is the next-to-the last, are already the most-honored series of stories in the history of science fiction.

Illustration by Mike Aspergren





Ngai, who rules the universe from His golden throne atop the holy mountain Kirinyaga, which men now call Mount Kenya, created the Sun and the Moon, and declared that they should have equal domain over the Earth.

The Sun would bring warmth to the world, and all of Ngai's creatures would thrive and grow strong in the light. And when the light vanished and Ngai slept He ordered the Moon to watch over His creations.

But the Moon was duplicitous, and formed a secret alliance with the Lion and the Leopard and the Hyena, and many nights, while Ngai slept, it would turn only a part of its face to the Earth. At such times the predators would go forth to maim and kill and eat their fellow creatures.

Finally one man, a *mundumugu*—a witch doctor—realized that the Moon had tricked Ngai, and he made up his mind to correct the problem. He might have appealed to Ngai, but he was a proud man, and so he took it upon himself to make certain that the flesh eaters would no longer have a partnership with the darkness.

He retired to his *boma* and allowed no visitors. For nine days and nine nights he rolled his bones and arranged his charms and mixed his potions, and when he emerged on the morning of the tenth day, he was ready to do what must be done.

The Sun was overhead, and he knew that there could be no darkness as long as the Sun shone down upon the Earth. He uttered a mystic chant, and soon he was flying into the sky to confront the Sun.

"Halt!" he said. "Your brother the Moon is evil. You must remain where you are, lest Ngai's creatures continue to die."

"What is that to me?" responded the Sun. "I cannot shirk my duty simply because my brother shirks his."

The *mundumugu* held up a hand. "I will not let you pass," he said.

But the Sun merely laughed, and proceeded on its path, and when it reached the *mundumugu* it gobbled him up and spat out the ashes, for even the greatest *mundumugu* cannot stay the Sun from its course.

That story has been known to every *mundumugu* since Ngai created Gikuyu, the first man. Of them all, only one ignored it.

I am that *mundumugu*.

It is said that from the moment of birth, even of conception, every living thing has embarked upon an inevitable trajectory that culminates in its death. If this is true of all living things, and it seems to be, then it is also true of man. And if it is true of man, then it must be true of the gods who made man in their image.

Yet this knowledge does not lessen the pain of death. I had just come back from comforting Katuma, whose father, old Siboki, had finally died, not from disease or injury, but rather from the awful burden of his years.

Siboki had been one of the original colonists on our terraformed world of Kirinyaga, a member of the Council of Elders, and though he had grown feeble in mind as well as body, I knew I would miss him as I missed few others.

As I walked back through the village, on the long, winding path by the river that eventually led to my *boma,* I was very much aware of my own mortality. I was not that much younger than Siboki, and indeed was already an old man when we left Kenya and emigrated to Kirinyaga. I knew my death could not be too far away, and yet I hoped that it was, not from selfishness, but because Kirinyaga was not yet ready to do without me. The *mundumugu* is more than a shaman who utters curses and creates spells; he is the repository of all the moral and civil laws, all the customs and traditions, of the Kikuyu people, and I was not convinced that Kirinyaga had yet produced a competent successor.

It is a harsh and lonely life, the life of a *mundumugu.* He is more feared than loved by the people he serves. This is not his fault, but rather the nature of his position. He must do what he knows to be right for his people, and that means he must sometimes make unpopular decisions.

How strange, then, that the decision that brought me down had nothing at all to do with my people, but rather with a stranger.

Still, I should have had a premonition about it, for no conversation is ever truly random. As I was walking past the scarecrows in the fields on the way to my *boma,* I came across Kimanti, the young son of Ngobe, driving two of his goats home from their morning's grazing.

"*Jambo,* Koriba," he greeted me, shading his eyes from the bright overhead sun.

"Jambo, Kimanti," I said. "I see that your father now allows you to tend to his goats. Soon the day will come that he puts you in charge of his cattle."

"Soon," he agreed, offering me a water gourd. "It is a warm day. Would you like something to drink?"

"That is very generous of you," I said, taking the gourd and holding it to my mouth.

"I have always been generous to you, have I not, Koriba?" he said.

"Yes, you have," I replied suspiciously, wondering what favor he was preparing to request.

"Then why do you allow my father's right arm to remain shriveled and useless?" he asked. "Why do you not cast a spell and make it like other men's arms?"

"It is not that simple, Kimanti," I said. "It is not I who shriveled your father's arm, but Ngai. He would not have done so without a purpose."

"What purpose is served by crippling my father?" asked Kimanti.

"If you wish, I shall sacrifice a goat and ask Ngai why He has allowed it," I said.

He considered my offer and then shook his head. "I do not care to hear Ngai's answer, for it will change nothing." He paused, lost in thought for a moment. "How long do you think Ngai will be our god?"

"Forever," I said, surprised at his question.

"That cannot be," he replied seriously. "Surely Ngai was not our god when He was just a *mtoto*. He must have killed the old gods when He was young and powerful. But he has been our god for a long time now, and it is time someone killed Him. Maybe the new god will show more compassion toward my father."

"Ngai created the world," I said. "He created the Kikuyu and the Maasai and the Wakamba, and even the Europeans, and He created the holy mountain Kirinyaga, for which our world is named. He has existed since time began, and He will exist until it ends."

Kimanti shook his head again. "If He has been here that long, He is ready to die. It is just a matter of who will kill Him." He paused thoughtfully. "Perhaps I myself will, when I am older and stronger."

"Perhaps," I agreed. "But before you do, let me tell you the story of the King of the Zebras."

"Is this story about Ngai or zebras?" he asked.

"Why don't you listen?" I said. "Then, when I have finished, you can tell *me* what it was about."

I gently lowered myself to the ground, and he squatted down next to me.

"There was a time," I began, "when zebras did not have stripes. They were as brown as the dried grasses on the savannah, as dull to the eye as the bole of the acacia tree. And because their color protected them, they were rarely taken by the lion and the leopard, who found it much easier to find and stalk the wildebeest and the topi and the impala.

"Then one day a son was born to the King of the Zebras—but it was not a normal son, for it had no nostrils. The King of the Zebras was first saddened for his son, and then outraged that such a thing should be allowed. The more he dwelt upon it, the more angry he became. Finally he ascended the holy mountain, and came at last to the peak, where Ngai ruled the world from His golden throne.

" 'Have you come to sing my praises?' asked Ngai.

" 'No!' answered the King of the Zebras. 'I have come to tell you that you are a terrible god, and that I am here to kill you.'

" 'What have I done to you that you should wish to kill me?' asked Ngai.

" 'You gave me a son who has no nostrils, so he cannot sense when the lion and the leopard are approaching him, and because of that they will surely find and kill him when at last he leaves his mother's side. You

have been a god too long, and you have forgotten how to be compassionate.'

" 'Wait!' said Ngai, and suddenly there was such power in His voice that the King of the Zebras froze where he was. 'I will give your son nostrils, since that is what you want.'

" 'Why were you so cruel in the first place?' demanded the King of the Zebras, his anger not fully assuaged.

" 'Gods work in mysterious ways,' answered Ngai, 'and what seems cruel to you may actually be compassionate. Because you had been a good and noble king, I gave your son eyes that could see in the dark, that could see through bushes, that could even see around trees, so that he could never be surprised by the lion and the leopard, even should the wind's direction favor them. And because of this gift, he did not need his nostrils. I took them away so that he would not have to breathe in the dust that chokes his fellow zebras during the dry season. But now I have given him back his sense of smell, and taken away his special vision, because you have demanded it.'

" 'Then you *did* have a reason,' moaned the King of the Zebras. 'When did I become so foolish?'

" 'The moment you thought you were greater than me,' answered Ngai, rising to His true height, which was taller than the clouds. 'And to punish you for your audacity, I decree that from this moment forward you and all your kind shall no longer be brown like the dried grasses, but will be covered with black and white stripes that will attract the lion and the leopard from miles away. No matter where you go on the face of the world, you will never again be able to hide from them.'

"And so saying, Ngai waved a hand and every zebra in the world was suddenly covered with the same stripes you see today."

I stopped and stared at Kimanti.

"That is the end?" he asked.

"That is the end."

Kimanti stared at a millipede crawling in the dirt.

"The zebra was a baby, and could not explain to its father that it had special eyes," he said at last. "My father's arm has been shriveled for many long rains, and the only explanation he has received is that Ngai works in mysterious ways. He has been given no special senses to make up for it, for if he had been he would surely know about them by now." Kimanti looked at me thoughtfully. "It is an interesting story, Koriba, and I am sorry for the King of the Zebras, but I think a new god must come along and kill Ngai very soon."

There we sat, the wise old *mundumugu* who had a parable for every problem, and the foolish young *kehee*—an uncircumsized boy—who had

no more knowledge of his world than a tadpole, in total opposition to each other.

Only a god with Ngai's sense of humor would have arranged for the *kehee* to be right.

It began when the ship crashed.

(There are those embittered men and women who would say it began the day Kirinyaga received its charter from the Eutopian Council, but they are wrong.)

Maintenance ships fly among the Eutopian worlds, delivering goods to some, mail to others, services to a few. Only Kirinyaga has no traffic with Maintenance. They are permitted to observe us—indeed, that is one of the conditions of our charter—but they may not interfere, and since we have tried to create a Kikuyu Utopia, we have no interest in commerce with Europeans.

Still, Maintenance ships *have* landed on Kirinyaga from time to time. One of the conditions of our charter is that if a citizen is unhappy with our world, he need only walk to that area known as Haven, and a Maintenance ship will pick him up and take him either to Earth or to another Eutopian world. Once a Maintenance ship landed to disgorge two immigrants, and very early in Kirinyaga's existence Maintenance sent a representative to interfere with our religious practices.

I don't know why the ship was so close to Kirinyaga to begin with. I had not ordered Maintenance to make any orbital adjustments lately, for the short rains were not due for another two months, and it was right that the days passed hot and bright and unchanging. To the best of my knowledge, none of the villagers had made the pilgrimage to Haven, so no Maintenance ship should have been sent to Kirinyaga. But the fact remains that one moment the sky was clear and blue, and the next there was a streak of light plunging down to the surface of the planet. An explosion followed; though I could not see it, I could both hear it and see the results, for the cattle became very nervous and herds of impala and zebra bolted this way and that in panic.

It was about twenty minutes later that young Jinja, the son of Kichanta, ran up the hill to my *boma*.

"You must come, Koriba!" he said as he gasped for breath.

"What has happened?" I asked.

"A Maintenance ship has crashed!" he said. "The pilot is still alive!"

"Is he badly hurt?"

Jinja nodded. "Very badly. I think he may die soon."

"I am an old man, and it would take me a very long time to walk to the pilot," I said. "It would be better for you to take three young men from the village and bring him back to me on a litter."

Jinja raced off while I went into my hut to see what I had that might ease the pilot's pain. There were some qat leaves, if he was strong enough to chew them, and a few ointments if he wasn't. I contacted Maintenance on my computer, and told them that I would apprise them of the man's condition after I examined him.

In years past, I would have sent my assistant to the river to bring back water for washing out the pilot's wounds, but I no longer had an assistant, and the *mundumugu* does not carry water, so I simply waited atop my hill, my gaze turned toward the direction of the crash. A grass fire had started, and a column of smoke rose from it. I saw Jinja and the others trotting across the savannah with the litter; I saw topi and impala and even buffalo race out of their way; and then I could not see them for almost ten minutes. When they once again came into view, they were walking, and it was obvious that they were carrying a man on the litter.

Before they reached my *boma,* however, Karenja came up the long, winding path from the village.

"*Jambo,* Koriba," he said.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"The whole village knows that a Maintenance ship has crashed," he replied. "I have never seen a European before. I came to see if his face is really as white as milk."

"You are doomed to be disappointed," I said. "We call them white, but in reality they are shades of pink and tan."

"Even so," he said, squatting down, "I have never seen one."

I shrugged. "As you will."

Jinja and the young men arrived a few minutes later with the litter. On it lay the twisted body of the pilot. His arms and legs were broken, and there was very little skin on him that was not burned. He had lost a lot of blood, and some still seeped through his wounds. He was unconscious, but breathing regularly.

"*Asante sana,*" I said to the four young men. "Thank you. You have done well this day."

I had one of them fill my gourds with water. The other three bowed and began walking down the hill, while I went through my various ointments, choosing the one that would cause the least discomfort when placed on the burns.

Karenja watched in rapt fascination. Twice I had to rebuke him for touching the pilot's blond hair in wonderment. As the sun changed positions in the sky, I had him help me move the pilot into the shade.

Then, after I had tended to the pilot's wounds, I went into my hut, activated my computer, and contacted Maintenance again. I explained that the pilot was still alive, but that all of his limbs were broken, his

body was covered with burns, and that he was in a coma and would probably die soon.

Their answer was that they had already dispatched a medic, who would arrive within half an hour, and they told me to have someone waiting at Haven to guide the medic to my *boma*. Since Karenja was still looking at the pilot, I ordered him to greet the ship and bring the medic to me.

The pilot did not stir for the next hour. At least, I do not think he did, but I dozed with my back against a tree for a few minutes, so I cannot be sure. What woke me was a woman's voice speaking a language I had not heard for many years. I got painfully to my feet just in time to greet the medic that Maintenance had sent.

"You must be Koriba," she said in English. "I have been trying to communicate with the gentleman who accompanied me, but I don't think he understood a word I said."

"I am Koriba," I said in English.

She extended her hand. "I am Doctor Joyce Witherspoon. May I see the patient?"

I led her over to where the pilot lay.

"Do you know his name?" I asked. "We could not find any identification."

"Samuel or Samuels, I'm not sure," she said, kneeling down next to him. "He's in a bad way." She gave him a perfunctory examination, lasting less than a minute. "We could do much more for him back at Base, but I hate to move him in this condition."

"I can have him moved to Haven within an hour," I said. "The sooner you have him in your hospital, the better."

She shook her head. "I think he'll have to remain here until he's a little stronger."

"I will have to consider it," I said.

"There's nothing to consider," she said. "In my medical opinion, he's too weak to move." She pointed to a piece of his shin bone that had broken through the skin of his leg. "I need to set most of the broken bones, and make sure there's no infection."

"You could do this at your hospital," I said.

"I can do it here at much less cost to the patient's remaining vitality," she said. "What's the problem, Koriba?"

"The problem, *Memsaab* Witherspoon," I said, "is that Kirinyaga is a Kikuyu Utopia. This means a rejection of all things European, including your medicine."

"I'm not practicing it on any Kikuyu," she said. "I'm trying to save a Maintenance pilot who just happened to crash on your world."

I stared at the pilot for a long moment. "All right," I said at last. "That is a logical argument. You may minister to his wounds."

"Thank you," she said.

"But he must leave in three days' time," I said. "I will not risk contamination beyond that."

She looked at me as if she was about to argue, but said nothing. Instead, she opened the medical kit she had brought, and injected something—a sedative, I assumed, or a pain killer, or a combination of the two—into his arm.

"She is a witch!" said Karenja. "See how she punctures his skin with a metal thorn!" He stared at the pilot, fascinated. "Now he will surely die."

Joyce Witherspoon worked well into the night, cleansing the pilot's wounds, setting his broken bones, breaking his fever. I don't remember when I fell asleep, but when I woke up, shivering, in the cold morning air just after sunrise, she was sleeping and Karenja was gone.

I built a fire, then sat near it with my blanket wrapped around me, until the sun began warming the air. Joyce Witherspoon woke up shortly thereafter.

"Good morning," she said when she saw me sitting a short distance away from her.

"Good morning, *Memsaab* Witherspoon," I replied.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"It is morning."

"I mean, what hour and minute is it?"

"We do not have hours and minutes on Kirinyaga," I told her. "Only days."

"I should look at Mr. Samuels."

"He is still alive," I said.

"Of course he is," she replied. "But the poor man will need skin grafts, and he may lose that right leg. He'll be a long time recovering." She paused and looked around. "Uh . . . where do I wash up around here?"

"The river runs by the foot of my hill," I said. "Be sure you beat the water first, to frighten away the crocodiles."

"What kind of Utopia has crocodiles?" she asked with a smile.

"What Eden has no serpents?" I said.

She laughed and walked down the hill. I took a sip from my water gourd, then killed the fire and spread the ashes. One of the boys from the village came by to take my goats out to graze, and another brought firewood and took my gourds down to the river to fill them.

When Joyce Witherspoon returned from the river some twenty minutes later, she was not alone. With her was Kibo, the third and youngest wife of Koinnage, the paramount chief of the village, and in Kibo's arms

was Katabo, her infant son. His left arm was swollen to twice its normal size, and was badly discolored.

"I found this woman laundering her clothes by the river," said Joyce Witherspoon, "and I noticed that her child had a badly infected arm. It looks like some kind of insect bite. I managed through sign language to convince her to follow me up here."

"Why did you not bring Katabo to me?" I asked Kibo in Swahili.

"Last time you charged me two goats, and he remained sick for many days, and Koinnage beat me for wasting the goats," she said, so terrified she had made me angry that she could not think of a lie.

Even as Kibo spoke, Joyce Witherspoon began approaching her and Katabo with a syringe in her hand.

"This is a broad-spectrum antibiotic," she explained to me. "It also contains a steroid that will prevent itching or any discomfort while the infection remains."

"Stop!" I said harshly in English.

"What's the matter?"

"You may not do this," I said. "You are here to minister to the pilot only."

"This is a baby, and it's suffering," she said. "It'll take me two seconds to give it a shot and cure it."

"I cannot permit it."

"What's the matter with you?" she demanded. "I read your biography. You may dress like a savage and sit in the dirt next to your fire, but you were educated at Cambridge and received your post-graduate degrees from Yale. Surely you know how easily I can end this child's suffering."

"That's not the point," I said.

"Then what *is* the point?"

"You may not medicate this child. It seems like a blessing now—but once before we accepted the Europeans' medicine, and then their religion, and their clothing, and their laws, and their customs, and eventually we ceased to be Kikuyu and became a new race, a race of black Europeans known only as Kenyans. We came to Kirinyaga to make sure that such a thing does not happen to us again."

"*He* won't know why he feels better. You can credit it to your god or yourself for all I care."

I shook my head. "I appreciate your sentiment, but I cannot let you corrupt our Utopia."

"Look at him," she said, pointing to Katabo's swollen arm. "Is Kirinyaga a Utopia for *him*? Where is it written that Utopias must have sick and suffering children?"

"Nowhere."

"Well, then?"

"It is not written," I continued, "because the Kikuyu do not have a written language."

"Will you at least let the mother decide?"

"No," I said.

"Why not?"

"The mother will think only of her child," I answered. "*I* must think of an entire world."

"Perhaps her child is more important to her than your world is to you."

"She is incapable of making a reasoned decision," I said. "Only *I* can foresee all the consequences."

Suddenly Kibo, who understood not a word of English, turned to me.

"Will the European witch make my little Katabo better?" she asked. "Why are you two arguing?"

"The European witch is here only for the European," I answered. "She has no power to help the Kikuyu."

"Can she not try?" asked Kibo.

"*I* am your *mundumugu*," I said harshly.

"But look at the pilot," said Kibo, pointing to Samuels. "Yesterday he was all but dead. Today his skin is already healing, and his arms and legs are straight again."

"Her god is the god of the Europeans," I answered, "just as her magic is the magic of the Europeans. Her spells do not work on the Kikuyu."

Kibo fell silent, and clutched Katabo to her breast.

I turned to Joyce Witherspoon. "I apologize for speaking in Swahili, but Kibo knows no other language."

"It's all right," she said. "I had no difficulty following it."

"I thought you told me you only spoke English."

"Sometimes you needn't understand the words to translate. I believe you were saying, in essence, 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me.' "

The pilot moaned just then, and suddenly all of her attention was focused upon him. He was coming into a state of semi-consciousness, unfocused and unintelligible but no longer comatose, and she began administering medications into the tubes that were already attached to his arms and legs. Kibo watched in wonderment, but kept her distance.

I remained on my hill most of the morning. I offered to remove the curse from Katabo's arm and give him some soothing lotions, but Kibo refused, saying that Koinnage steadfastly refused to part with any more goats.

"I will not charge you this time," I said, for I wanted Koinnage on my side. I uttered a spell over the child, then treated his arm with a salve made from the pulped bark of the acacia tree. I ordered Kibo to return to her *shamba* with him, and told her that the child's arm would return to normal within five days.

Finally it was time for me to go into the village to bless the scarecrows and give Leibo, who had lost her baby, ointment to ease the pain in her breasts. I would meet with Bakada, who had accepted the bride price for his daughter and wanted me to preside at the wedding, and finally I would join Koinnage and the Council of Elders as they discussed the weighty issues of the day.

As I walked down the long, winding path beside the river, I found myself thinking how much like the Europeans' Garden of Eden this world looked.

How was I to know that the serpent had already arrived?

After I had tended to my chores in the village, I stopped at Ngobe's hut to share a gourd of *pombe* with him. He asked about the pilot, for by now everyone in the village had heard about him, and I explained that the European's *mundumugu* was curing him and would take him back to Maintenance headquarters in two more days.

"She must have powerful magic," he said, "for I am told that the man's body was badly broken." He paused. "It is too bad," he added wistfully, "that such magic will not work for the Kikuyu."

"My magic has always been sufficient," I said.

"True," he said uneasily. "But I remember the day when we brought Tabari's son back after the hyenas had attacked him and chewed off one of his legs. You eased his pain, but you could not save him. Perhaps the witch from Maintenance could have."

"The pilot had broken his legs, but they were not chewed off," I said defensively. "No one could have saved Tabari's son after the hyenas had finished with him."

"Perhaps you are right," he said.

My first inclination was to pounce on the word *"perhaps,"* but then I decided that he meant no insult by it, so I finished my *pombe,* cast the bones and read that he would have a successful harvest, and left his hut.

I stopped in the center of the village to recite a fable to the children, then went over to Koinnage's *shamba* and entered his *boma* for the daily meeting of the Council of Elders. Most of them were already there, grim-faced and silent. Finally Koinnage emerged from his hut and joined us.

"We have serious business to discuss today," he announced. "Perhaps the most serious we have *ever* discussed," he added, staring straight at me. Suddenly he faced his wives' huts. "Kibo!" he shouted. "Come here!"

Kibo emerged from her hut and walked over to us, carrying little Katabo in her arms.

"You all saw my son's arm yesterday," said Koinnage. "It was swollen to twice its normal size, and was the color of death." He took the child and held it above his head. "Now look at him!" he cried.

Katabo's arm was once again a healthy color, and almost all of the swelling had vanished.

"My medicine worked faster than I had anticipated," I said.

"This is not *your* medicine at all!" he said accusingly. "This is the European witch's medicine!"

I looked at Kibo. "I ordered you to leave my *boma* ahead of me!" I said sternly.

"You did not order me not to return," she said, her face filled with defiance as she stood next to Koinnage. "The witch pierced Katabo's arm with a metal thorn, and before I could climb back down your hill the swelling was already half gone."

"You disobeyed my command," I said ominously.

"I am the paramount chief, and I absolve her," interjected Koinnage.

"I am the *mundumugu,* and I do not!" I said, and suddenly Kibo's defiance was replaced by terror.

"We have more important things to discuss," snapped Koinnage. This startled me, for when I am angry, no one has the courage to confront or contradict me.

I pulled some luminescent powder, made from the ground-up bodies of night-stalking beetles, out of my pouch, held it on the palm of my hand, raised my hand to my mouth, and blew the powder in Kibo's direction. She screamed in terror and fell writhing to the ground.

"What have you done to her?" demanded Koinnage.

I have terrified her beyond your ability to comprehend, which is a just and fitting punishment for disobeying me, I thought. Aloud I said, "I have marked her spirit so that all the predators of the Other World can find it at night when she sleeps. If she swears never to disobey her *mundumugu* again, if she shows proper contrition for disobeying me today, then I shall remove the markings before she goes to sleep this evening. If not . . ." I shrugged and let the threat hang in the air.

"Then perhaps the European witch will remove the markings," said Koinnage.

"Do you think the god of the Europeans is mightier than Ngai?" I demanded.

"I do not know," replied Koinnage. "But he healed my son's arm in moments, when Ngai would have taken days."

"For years you have told us to reject all things European," added Karenja, "yet I myself have seen the witch use her magic on the dying pilot, and I think it is stronger than *your* magic."

"It is a magic for Europeans only," I said.

"This is not so," answered Koinnage. "For did the witch not offer it to Katabo? If she can halt the suffering of our sick and our injured faster than Ngai can, then we must consider accepting her offer."

"If you accept her offer," I said, "before long you will be asked to accept her god, and her science, and her clothing, and her customs."

"Her science is what created Kirinyaga and flew us here," said Ngobe. "How can it be bad if it made Kirinyaga possible?"

"It is not bad for the Europeans," I said, "because it is part of their culture. But we must never forget why we came to Kirinyaga in the first place: to create a Kikuyu world and reestablish a Kikuyu culture."

"We must think seriously about this," said Koinnage. "For years we have believed that every facet of the Europeans' culture was evil, for we had no examples of it. But now that we see that even a female can cure our illness faster than Ngai can, it is time to reconsider."

"If her magic could have cured my withered arm when I was still a boy," added Ngobe, "why would that have been evil?"

"It would have been against the will of Ngai," I said.

"Does not Ngai rule the universe?" he asked.

"You know that He does," I replied.

"Then nothing that happens can be contrary to His wishes, and if she could have cured me, it would *not* have been against Ngai's will."

I shook my head. "You do not understand."

"We are trying to understand," said Koinnage. "Enlighten us."

"The Europeans have many wonders, and these wonders will entice you, as they are doing right now . . . but if you accept one European thing, soon they will insist that you accept them all. Koinnage, their religion only allows a man to have one wife. Which two will you divorce?"

I turned to the others. "Ngobe, they will make Kimanti attend a school where he will learn to read and write. But since we do not have a written language, he will learn to write only in a European language, and the things and people he reads about and learns about will all be European."

I walked among the Elders, offering an example to each. "Karenja, if you do a service for Tabari, you will expect a chicken or a goat or perhaps even a cow in return, depending on the nature of the service. But the Europeans will make him reward you with paper money, which you cannot eat, and which cannot reproduce and make a man rich."

On and on I went, until I had run through all the Elders, pointing out what they would lose if they allowed the Europeans a toehold in our society.

"All that is on the one hand," said Koinnage when I had finished. He held his other hand out, palm up. "On the other hand is an end to illness and suffering, which is no small achievement in itself. Koriba has said that if we let the Europeans in, they will force us to change our ways. *I* say that some of our ways *need* changing. If their god is a greater healer than Ngai, who is to say that he may not also bring better weather, or more fertile cattle, or richer soil?"

"*No!*" I cried. "*You* may all have forgotten why we came here, but *I* have not. Our mandate was not to establish a European Utopia, but a Kikuyu one!"

"And *have* we established it?" asked Karenja sardonically.

"We are coming closer every day," I told him. "*I* am making it a reality."

"Do children suffer in Utopia?" persisted Karenja. "Do men grow up with withered arms? Do women die in childbirth? Do hyenas attack shepherds in Utopia?"

"It is a matter of balance," I said. "Unrestricted growth would eventually lead to unrestricted hunger. You have not seen what it has done on Earth, but *I* have."

Finally it was old Jandara who spoke.

"Do people *think* in a Utopia?" he asked me.

"Of course they do," I replied.

"If they think, are some of their thoughts new, just as some are old?"

"Yes."

"Then perhaps we should consider letting the witch tend to our illnesses and injuries," he said. "For if Ngai allows new thoughts in His Utopia, He must realize they will lead to change. And if change is not evil, then perhaps lack of change, such as we have striven for here, *is* evil, or at least wrong." He got to his feet. "You may debate the merits of the question. As for myself, I have had pain in my joints for many years, and Ngai has not cured it. I am climbing Koriba's hill to see if the god of the Europeans can end my pain."

And with that, he walked past me and out of the *boma*.

I was prepared to argue my case all day and all night if necessary, but Koinnage turned his back on me—on *me*, his *mundumugu*!—and began carrying his son back to Kibo's hut. That signaled the end to the meeting, and each of the Elders got up and left without daring to look me in the face.

There were more than a dozen villagers gathered at the foot of my hill when I arrived. I walked past them and soon reached my *boma*.

Jandara was still there. Joyce Witherspoon had given him an injection, and was handing him a small bottle of pills as I arrived.

"Who told you that you could treat the Kikuyu?" I demanded in English.

"I did not offer to treat them," she replied. "But I am a doctor, and I will not turn them away."

"Then *I* will," I said. I turned and looked down at the villagers. "You may not come up there!" I said sternly. "Go back to your *shambas*."

The adults all looked uneasy but stood their ground, while one small boy began climbing up the hill.

"Your *mundumugu* has forbidden you to climb this hill!" I said. "Ngai will punish you for your transgression!"

"The god of the Europeans is young and powerful," said the boy. "He will protect me from Ngai." And now I saw that the boy was Kimanti.

"Stay back—I warn you!" I shouted.

Kimanti hefted his wooden spear. "Ngai will not harm me," he said confidently. "If He tries, I will kill him with *this*."

He walked right by me and approached Joyce Witherspoon.

"I have cut my foot on a rock," he said. "If your god will heal me, I will sacrifice a goat to thank him."

She did not understand a word he said, but when he showed her his foot she began treating it.

He walked back down the hill, unmolested by Ngai, and when he was both alive and healed the next morning, word went out to other villages and soon there was a seemingly endless line of the sick and the lame, all waiting to climb my hill and accept European cures for Kikuyu ills.

Once again I told them to disperse. This time they seemed not even to hear me. They simply remained in line, neither arguing back as Kimanti had, nor even acknowledging my presence, each of them waiting patiently until it was their turn to be treated by the European witch.

I thought that when she left, things would go back to the way they had been, that the people would once again fear Ngai and show respect to their *mundumugu*—but this was not to be. Oh, they went about their daily chores, they planted their crops and tended to their cattle . . . but they did not come to me with their problems as they always had done in the past.

At first I thought we had entered one of those rare periods in which no one in the village was ill or injured, but then one day I saw Shanaka walking out across the savannah. Since he rarely left his *shamba,* and *never* left the village, I was curious about his destination and I decided to follow him. He walked due west for more than half an hour, until he reached the landing area at Haven.

"What is wrong?" I asked when I finally caught up with him.

He opened his mouth to reveal a serious abcess above one of his teeth. "I am in great pain," he said. "I have been unable to eat for three days."

"Why did you not come to me?" I asked.

"The god of the Europeans has defeated Ngai," answered Shanaka. "He will not help me."

"He will," I assured him.

Shanaka shook his head, then winced from the motion. "You are an old man, and Ngai is an old god, and both of you have lost your powers," he said unhappily. "I wish it were otherwise, but it is not."

"So you are deserting your wives and children because you have lost your faith in Ngai?" I demanded.

"No," he replied. "I will ask the Maintenance ship to take me to a European *mundumugu,* and when I am cured I will return home."

"*I* will cure you," I said.

He looked at me for a long moment. "There was a time when you could cure me," he said at last. "But that time has passed. I will go to the Europeans' *mundumugu.*"

"If you do," I said sternly, "you may never call on me for help again."

He shrugged. "I never intended to," he said with neither bitterness nor rancor.

Shanaka returned the next day, his mouth healed.

I stopped by his *boma* to see how he was feeling, for I remained the *mundumugu* whether he wanted my services or not, and as I walked through the fields of his *shamba* I saw that he had two new scarecrows, gifts of the Europeans. The scarecrows had mechanical arms that flapped constantly, and they rotated so that they did not always face in one direction.

"*Jambo,* Koriba," he greeted me. Then, seeing that I was looking at his scarecrows, he added, "Are they not wonderful?"

"I will withhold judgment until I see how long they function," I said. "The more moving parts an object has, the more likely it is to break."

He looked at me, and I thought I detected a hint of pity in his expression. "They were created by the God of Maintenance," he said. "They will last forever."

"Or until their power packs are empty," I said, but he did not know what I meant, and so my sarcasm was lost on him. "How is your mouth?"

"It feels much better," he replied. "They pricked me with a magic thorn to end the pain, then cut away the evil spirits that had invaded my mouth." He paused. "They have very powerful gods, Koriba."

"You are back on Kirinyaga now," I said sternly. "Be careful how you blaspheme."

"I do not blaspheme," he said. "I speak the truth."

"And now you will want me to bless the Europeans' scarecrows, I suppose," I said with finely wrought irony.

He shrugged. "If it makes you happy," he said.

"If it makes *me* happy?" I repeated angrily.

"That's right," he said nonchalantly. "The scarecrows, being European, certainly do not *need* your blessings, but if you will feel better . . ."

I had often wondered what might happen if for some reason the *mundumugu* was no longer feared by the members of the village. I had never once considered what it might be like if he were merely tolerated.

* * *

Still more villagers went to Maintenance's infirmary, and each came back with some gift from the Europeans: time-saving gadgets for the most part. Western gadgets. Culture-killing gadgets.

Again and again I went into the village and explained why such things must be rejected. Day after day I spoke to the Council of Elders, reminding them why we had come to Kirinyaga—but most of the original settlers were dead, and the next generation, those who had become our Elders, had no memories of Kenya. Indeed, those of them who spoke to the Maintenance staff came home thinking that Kenya, rather than Kirinyaga, was some kind of Utopia, in which everyone was well-fed and well-cared-for and no farm ever suffered from drought.

They were polite, they listened respectfully to me, and then they went right ahead with whatever they had been doing or discussing when I arrived. I reminded them of the many times I and I alone had saved them from themselves, but they seemed not to care; indeed, one or two of the Elders acted as if, far from keeping Kirinyaga pure, I had in some mysterious way been hindering its growth.

"Kirinyaga is not *supposed* to grow!" I argued. "When you achieve a Utopia, you do not cast it aside and say, 'What changes can we make tomorrow?' "

"If you do not grow, you stagnate," answered Karenja.

"We can grow by expanding," I said. "We have an entire world to populate."

"That is not growing, but breeding," he replied. "You have done your job admirably, Koriba, for in the beginning we needed order and purpose above all else . . . but the time for your job is past. Now we have established ourselves here, and it is for *us* to choose how we will live."

"We have *already* chosen how to live!" I said angrily. "That is why we came here to begin with."

"I was just a *kehee,*" said Karenja. "Nobody asked me. And I did not ask my son, who was born here."

"Kirinyaga was created for the purpose of becoming a Kikuyu Utopia," I said. "This purpose is the basis of our charter. It cannot be changed."

"No one is suggesting that we don't want to live in a Utopia, Koriba," interjected Shanaka. "But the time has passed when you and you alone shall be the sole judge of what constitutes a Utopia."

"It is clearly defined."

"By *you,*" said Shanaka. "Some of us have our own definitions of Utopia."

"You were one of the original founders of Kirinyaga," I said accusingly. "Why have you never spoken out before?"

"Many times I wanted to," admitted Shanaka. "But always I was afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Of Ngai. Or you."

"They are much the same thing," added Karenja.

"But now that Ngai has lost His battle to the god of Maintenance, I am no longer afraid to speak," continued Shanaka. "Why should I suffer with the pain in my teeth? How was it unholy or blasphemous for the European witches to cure me? Why should my wife, who is as old as I am and whose back is bent from years of carrying wood and water, continue to carry them when there are machines to carry things for her?"

"Why should you live on Kirinyaga at all, if that is the way you feel?" I asked bitterly.

"Because I have worked as hard to make Kirinyaga a home for the Kikuyu as you have!" he shot back. "And I see no reason to leave just because my definition of Utopia doesn't agree with yours. Why don't *you* leave, Koriba?"

"Because I was charged with establishing our Utopia, and I have not yet completed my assignment," I said. "In fact, it is false Kikuyu like you who have made my work that much harder."

Shanaka got to his feet and looked around at the Elders.

"Am I a false Kikuyu because I want my grandson to read?" he demanded. "Or because I want to ease my wife's burden? Or because I do not wish to suffer physical pain that can easily be avoided?"

"No!" cried the Elders as one.

"Be very careful," I warned them. "For if *he* is not a false Kikuyu, then you are calling *me* one."

"No, Koriba," said Koinnage, rising to his feet. "You are not a false Kikuyu." He paused. "But you are a mistaken one. Your day—and mine—has passed. Perhaps, for a fleeting second, we did achieve Utopia—but that second is gone, and the new moments and hours require new Utopias." Then Koinnage, who had looked at me with fear so many times in the past, suddenly looked at me with great compassion. "It was *our* dream, Koriba, but it is not *theirs*—and if we still have some feeble handhold on today, tomorrow surely belongs to them."

"I will hear none of this!" I said. "You cannot redefine a Utopia as a matter of convenience. We moved here in order to be true to our faith and traditions, to avoid becoming what so many Kikuyu had become in Kenya. I will not let us become black Europeans!"

"We are becoming *something*," said Shanaka. "Perhaps just once there was an instant when you felt we were perfect Kikuyu—but that instant has long since passed. To remain so, not one of us could have had a new

thought, could have seen the world in a different way. We would have become the scarecrows you bless every morning."

I was silent for a very long time. Then, at last, I spoke. "This world breaks my heart," I said. "I tried so hard to mold it into what we had all wanted, and look at what it has become. What *you* have become."

"You can direct change, Koriba," said Shanaka, "but you cannot prevent it, and that is why Kirinyaga will always break your heart."

"I must go to my *boma* and think," I said.

"*Kwaheri,* Koriba," said Koinnage. *Good-bye,* Koriba. It had a sense of finality to it.

I spent many days alone on my hill, looking across the winding river to the green savannah, and thinking. I had been betrayed by the people I had tried to lead, by the very world I had helped to create. I felt that I had surely displeased Ngai in some way, and that He would strike me dead. I was quite prepared to die, even willing . . . but I did not die, for the gods draw their strength from their worshippers, and Ngai was now so weak that He could not even kill a feeble old man like myself.

Eventually I decided to go down among my people one last time, to see if any of them had rejected the enticements of the Europeans and come back to the ways of the Kikuyu.

The path was lined with mechanical scarecrows. The only meaningful way to bless *them* would be to renew their charges. I saw several women washing clothes by the river, but instead of pounding the fabrics with rocks, they were rubbing them on some artificial boards that had obviously been made for that purpose.

Suddenly I heard a ringing noise behind me, and, startled, I jumped, lost my footing, and fell heavily against a thorn bush. When I was able to get my bearings, I saw that I had almost been run over by a bicycle.

"I am sorry, Koriba," said the rider, who turned out to be young Kimanti. "I thought you heard me coming."

He helped me gingerly to my feet.

"My ears have heard many things," I said. "The scream of the fish eagle, the bleat of the goat, the laugh of the hyena, the cry of the newborn baby. But they were never meant to hear artificial wheels going down a dirt hill."

"It is much faster and easier than walking," he replied. "Are you going anywhere in particular? I will be happy to give you a ride."

It was probably the bicycle that made up my mind. "Yes," I replied. "I am going somewhere, and no, I will not be taken on a bicycle."

"Then I will walk with you," he said. "Where are you going?"

"To Haven," I said.

"Ah," he said with a smile. "You, too, have business with Maintenance. Where do you hurt?"

I touched the left side of my chest. "I hurt *here*—and the only business I have with Maintenance is to get as far from the cause of that pain as I can."

"You are leaving Kirinyaga?"

"I am leaving what Kirinyaga has become," I answered.

"Where will you go?" he asked. "What will you do?"

"I will go elsewhere, and I will do other things," I said vaguely, for where *does* an unemployed *mundumugu* go?

"We will miss you, Koriba," said Kimanti.

"I doubt it."

"We will," he repeated with sincerity. "When we recite the history of Kirinyaga to our children, you will not be forgotten." He paused. "It is true that you were wrong, but you were necessary."

"Is that how I am to be remembered?" I asked. "As a necessary evil?"

"I did not call you evil, just wrong."

We walked the next few miles in silence, and at last we came to Haven.

"I will wait with you if you wish," said Kimanti.

"I would rather wait alone," I said.

He shrugged. "As you wish. *Kwaheri,* Koriba."

"*Kwaheri,*" I replied.

After he left I looked around, studying the savannah and the river, the wildebeest and the zebras, the fish eagles and the marabou storks, trying to set them in my memory for all time to come.

"I am sorry, Ngai," I said at last. "I have done my best, but I have failed you." The ship that would take me away from Kirinyaga forever suddenly came into view.

"You must view them with compassion, Ngai," I said as the ship approached the landing strip. "They are not the first of your people to be bewitched by the Europeans."

And it seemed, as the ship touched down, that a voice spoke into my ear and said, *You have been my most faithful servant, Koriba, and so I shall be guided by your counsel. Do you really wish me to view them with compassion?*

I looked toward the village one last time, the village that had once feared and worshipped Ngai, and which had sold itself, like some prostitute, to the god of the Europeans.

"No," I said firmly.

"Are you speaking to me?" asked the pilot, and I realized that the hatch was open and waiting for me.

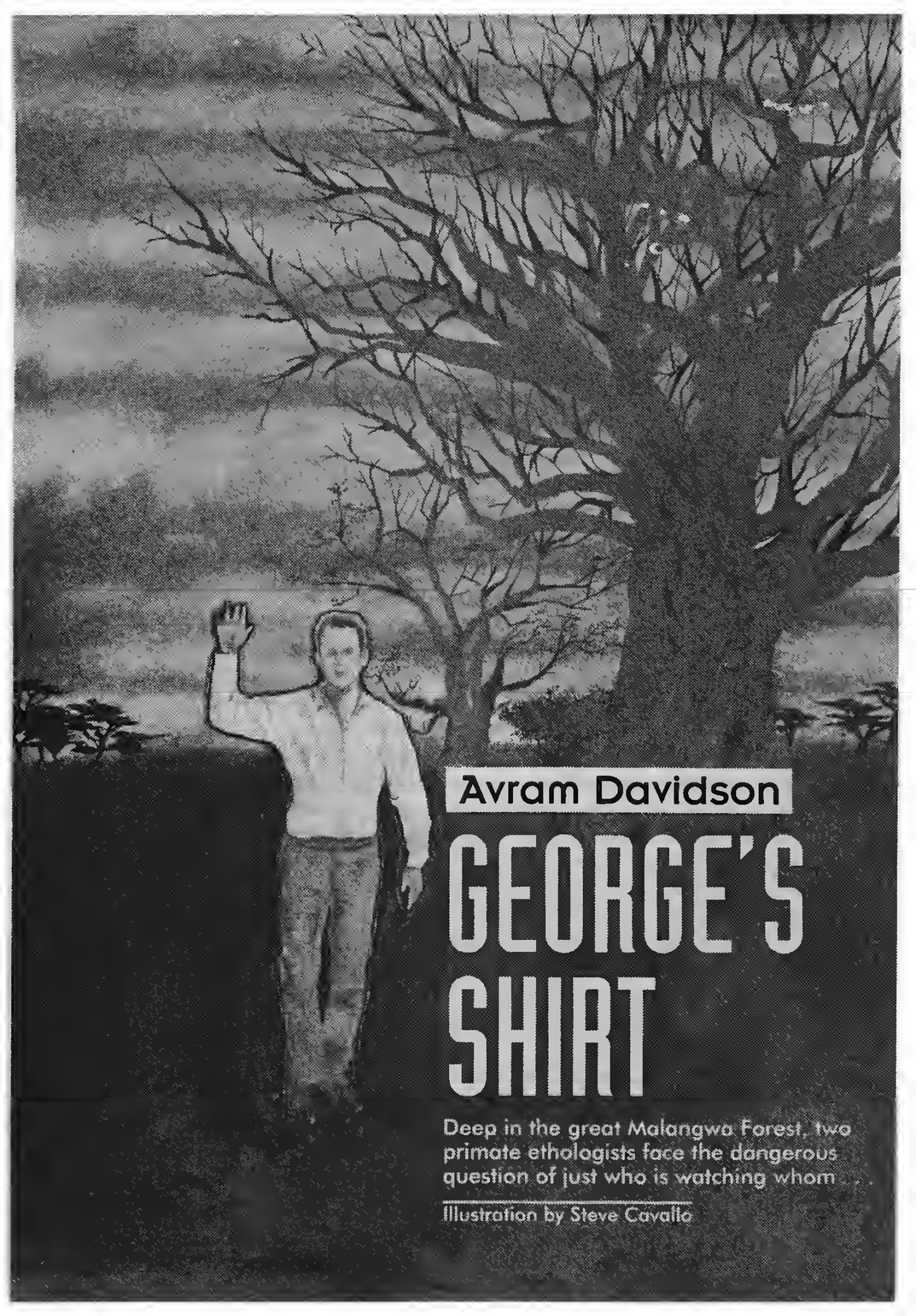
"No," I replied.

He looked around. "I don't see anyone else."

"He is very old and very tired," I said. "But He is here."

I climbed into the ship and did not look back. ●





Avram Davidson

GEORGE'S SHIRT

Deep in the great Malangwa Forest, two primate ethologists face the dangerous question of just who is watching whom . . .

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

Toward the end of day the animal-watcher's wife, whose name was Peggy, stood at the door of their pre-fab watching for the animal-watcher, whose name was George. The day was quite dim, later than usual, when, almost alarmed, she saw the white flash of George's shirt. She waved gaily and turned inside to light the lamps and do needless things—the needed things had all *been* done, really—to make the table ready for dinner. In the early days of their marriage in a city where everything was available, they lived in determined trendy squalor, eating on the floor; here, here, where Jungle and Savanna met, she lit candles on the dinner-table.

Dusk twilight and the gloaming, it was in fact later than he usually returned from his daily watch over the Rock Monkeys in the Zuli Woods. Then: as usual: quite without announcement, there he was. She never saw him emerge, but always suddenly he was there. She could make out almost nothing at this distance in this dim, but as he waved to her (she waved back) there was the flash of his white shirt. *White?* nay, but he would have it so. He said it was absolutely absurd to suppose that the Rockies were not perfectly aware that there was an alien crittur close nearby them and a khaki shirt made no matter at all. Across the intervening savanna, the equivalent of, say, several blocks, there was a low declivity or depression; it and the high grass enough to hide his figure after he stepped out of the Zuli Woods, a section of the great Malangwa Forest. Always at that first flash she waved, she seldom caught the wave back, nam port, this was the high point of the day . . . well . . . the second-highest . . . the evening meal.

To an extent, meals were planned a long while ahead: meals containing things they had brought with them—canned, dried, or fittable and keepable in the small kerosene-powered refrigerator. A pleasant note of novelty and freshness was added by what came with the fortnightly Cessna or the monthly Land Rover. Sometimes either one might bring a fresh fish or a fresh piece of meat, sometimes fruit for dessert or salad greens. And sometimes George had brought back something—a small plum-like thing several times—a chunky succulent once. "The Rockies were eating this," he'd said each time. "So it's got to be good." The "plum" was very nice: they decided to leave the greens to the Rock Monkeys. Who, after all, were why they themselves were here—

Who was at the door now?

As they embraced she said into his ear, "The figure entering the door was wearing a tussore silk suit and a solar topee. It was that of Hartley Vandergould, the man she loved." Well, that was the basic sentence, a part of her own family tradition since she and her older sister had read it together, howling with laughter, in a really shitty old cheap romance-novel which had belonged to Aunt Ednah (better not forget the *h*). Poor

old Ednah had been a clandestine reader of these cheap romance-novels; she treated them as though they were pornographic; they poured from the closets when, after her death, the poor old lady's room was Cleaned Out. (Also in the back of one of the closets, buried in a box, was a slim folder made to look like a book: what it contained were six photographs showing—from various angles—a naked young man in, how shall we put this, upstanding good health. By the worn state of the pseudo-book's binding, and by the total absence of dust on that box alone of Closet Stuff, it was adduced that Aunt Ednah had looked into it very very often; poor old Ednah). That was the basic, or original, sentence; Peggy often used variations, "The figure entering the door *was* wearing a pickelhaube helmet and sky-blue golf-knickers. It was that of Bernardo O'Schimmelpfennig—" or, "The figure entering the door was wearing a racoon-skin coat and an Eton Boater—"

"Had a busy day at the office, dear?" that was one of his contributions (it, the pre-fab, actually was her "office") to The Canon. They weren't rich, but they had lots of fun.

Lots.

And . . . *Question*: Who *washed* those white shirts? *Answer*: All clothes were jointly washed, jointly rinsed, jointly wrenched dry, and also jointly hanged up on the line. Hoyts *you?* (how's your joint?)

The grant for this four-month period of Rock Monkey-watching had come from the C.D. Bridges Foundation for Primate Ethology (*no n*); old Cecil Davies Bridges it was who first set a watch over the primates, sending Glady Senlac to peer down upon the Gibbon (later, the Gorilla); Emma Anderson to go and spy on the Lemur; Enid Grool to observe *Tuan* Orang Utan; and Doctor Alys Elwyn to overlook, first, the Langur, then the Chimpanzee—and God help any biped who forgot the *Doctor*. It is seen that all of these were women; old C.D. said that he was sure that women would *bond* (his word) more easily with the wild primates than men would. Women were gentler, said old C.D. They were less likely to disturb the Alpha Male (his phrase) by their mere presence. Their voices were softer and less disturbing (C.D. had perhaps never heard the voice of a woman scorned? Perhaps he never *had,* it being unlikely that he had ever scorned one; so one had heard) . . . and here old C.D. (smiled) (smirked) (leered) [*one*] . . . also, said he, they *smelled* better. Said he. Some said that Cecil Davies Bridges, primate ethology's Grand Old Man, was a Dirty Old Man; some, that he knew more than he was saying; but the point was mooted and the voice was muted by that sudden, violent, and still mysterious death in the tent hard upon the borders of the bush in the upper Utenanguo. The Foundation had offered the Rock Monkey grant to Peggy no sooner had the Old Man been

buried a hundred yards from the site of the tent, buried much deeper than any quasi-urban grave—for—for more than once had he quoted Kipling's poem—

After the burial parties leave
And the baffled kites have fled;
The wise hyaenas come out at eve
To take account of our dead.

—had he some unvoiced fear, doughty old Cecil? else why had he even whilst alive selected the very stones (very large stones) to be piled between coffin and grave-mound? eh?

How he died and why he died
Troubles them not a whit,
They snout the bushes and stones aside
And dig till they come to it

But Cecil Davies Bridges had taken account of *them,* and by now, baffled, they must long since have given up any hope for *his* old bones.

No sooner had the Old Man been buried, then, than a faction in the Foundation had come out for George. And not Peggy. But he and she persuaded a joint grant out of the Trustees.

"They are, yes, equally qualified," said the Trustees, at length equally agreed. *Whit*taker said so. Szabo said so, too.

And, at last in *situ,* she revealed a painfully kept secret. "I didn't either *wrench my ankle,*" she said, showing him the swollen joint. "You aren't either ever *too young to have arthritis.* 'See a doctor at once,' poo. Is the sight of one therapeutic? Time for all that later. This opportunity won't occur again . . . or it won't if we give it up now." She gave the foot an annoyed jiggle and at once at once she yelped. "Oh, George," she moaned, "I can't trudge, I can't crouch or squat or kneel or fold my legs. *You* take the notes. *I'll* write them up."

"Equally important," said George, stroking her arm. Was he being gallant? No. Just truthful. For far more than mere transcription was involved. Repetitions must be made sense of, patterns recognized, effects adduced from causes. Initiation separated from cycle. Hypothesis. Demonstration, well, you couldn't exactly always get the Rock Monkey or any other animal to *demonstrate.* Oh, sure, you could leave a lady-finger or a fig-newton out on a rock, and the Rock Monkeys would demonstrate that they would find lady-fingers or fig-newtons edible. But for this, one did not cross miles and miles (leagues and *leagues?*) of golden grass suddenly and very fast. The savanna had lost more and more of its green and gained more and more of its golden, before the heat had reached major shimmer, and long before everything bowed before the rain and the wind, they would have taken down the pre-fab, packed neatly, buried

and burned neatly, and gone. Gone by Land Rover, gone by lorry, gone by Cessna. *Gone.*

Would the Rocksters long before then have gotten quite, quite used to George and his white shirt? "One must hope," said George. "The court is certainly entitled to hope," he said. And would the monks, the monks, notice his absence and wonder or even pine, and if so, so for how long? "¿Queen sabu," George said. George said, "¿Queen sabu?"

"Dinnah!" he says, rubbing his mitts. If one had a vision of the two of them dining off wart-hog or even bush-beef, nyamas, which either one had shot somewhere roundabout with a rifle or shotgun or even for that matter an arbalest or arquebus; well . . . no. The last of the Fresh Vetch, carefully saved, was, well-oiled, in a bowl; so was the last of the Hobbled Eggs, so was the 1st of the pinocchio-cans, well anyway its contents. Mr. Ramchand of the shop of that name in the District Capital was very nice and did his best to brighten the corner where they were, with fresh-baked bread when it fit in with this shedjul or with that; he saved them special jars of chutney made by his sister-in-law's sister down in Durban, and if, rarely, there was a rump-steak from a rump which had not perished of acute senility: that, too. Koejavels in stroep, that, too. And if a can of the exceedingly scarce anchovy came slipping up over the horizon, Mr. Ramchand (in secret they called him *Little Mr. Ramchand*) would whip out of the shop and bag it with his slipper. But however willing and able he might be, his command of Italian was not copious; who cared. If the price of cans of anchovies for the salads depended on Peggy and George calling them pinocchios, well why the hell *not.*

Now and then, until evidently they went out of season, the sweet little fruit they called rock-plums, for dessert; now and then some so-called *pudding* or *custard* or *flan,* confected out of a package and by means of reconstituted milk and purified water. Louisa, a highly educated colleague who was English or anyway *Manx,* Louisa professed in civilized places to look down on such *sweets,* was *sweet* qauite U? as being both middle class and having no flavour. But Peggy and George being American/Canadian, didn't have to worry about the class structure or the class struggle, they really looked upon the desserts as camp, Sotch Fon. Whirr-whir with the egg-beater. Rattle. Splush. Not *a* sweet. *Sweet.* Num.

Speaking of Louisa, Peggy [recalling conversation]: " . . . and she wanted to know why all the way up here to watch the Rocksters in the Zuli Woods, when the ones in the Tenguato North were nearer? why that's just it I told her—*white man if you touch that last pinocchio you* **die**—I told her that's just it, it's *too* near, here we'll split that, the Tenguato, it's a relict population, maybe it's too inbred and its behavior patterns affected, maybe they're affected by the nearnesses, don't you see—"

"Right—okay, and you can have the heel of the last egg, then."

So they, Peggy and George, chose the Zuli and its Rock Monkeys and hoped they'd be more numerous, healthier, unaffected, and so on. Not made goosey and afraid of people, afraid even of harmless animal watchers, not made fearful of George and Peggy because of hunters and trappers and poachers . . . phoTOGraphers!

Full five years later it was still a scandal a group of Continental European magazine photographers had deliberately spooked a troop of Rock Monkeys in the Tenguato North in order to snap them in living motion as they fled, their grey eminences despoiled by terror and alarm. The Secret Tradition had it that, one night after these rogues had returned to Uru, the U Ten North capital-town, and laxly spread their story; the Secret Tradition had it that all the primatology people then in Uru (well . . . all the *men*) had gathered after midnight and solemnly and successively pissed into the gas tank of the scoundrel photographers' safari wagon: thus causing them to blow their budget on repairs, miss the targeted issue of the (spit) mag, fail to get their respective next assignment: and serve them all bloody well right. Nyaa.

"That's what I wrote her," Peggy concluded. And at once began another story.

Would observing the Monkey People without of course disturbing them, *would* it help the Human People understand themselves? understand love, hate, communality, commensality, quarreling, sharing, *not* sharing, crime, punishment, the passion between the sexes, child-rearing, rivalry . . . ? The primate ethologists sure hoped it would. One must hope, said they. Cain and Abel, War and Peace? Entitled to try, said they. They said, nothing to lose. . . .

Tomorrow was Sunday, *did* Peggy and George read the Bible? Sometimes they did, but never in relation to its being Sunday. Read the Bible on the Lord's Day? Alas no they *did*n't. Why not. *Not enough about monkeys in it,* George answered the single missionary who, unsolicitate, asked them about it. Slightly surprised, said he, "The Bible doesn't mention monkeys. The Bible mentions *apes.*" *Well there you are,* said George. Made no sense? no it *did*n't. Bless you.

"Say, Sunday tomorrow. Wash day." They used a cleaned-out oil-drum cut lengthwise, water by bucket from the spring, and a plumber's helper and a long pole. They washed George's white shirts and his skivvies, and they washed what Peggy called her Dainty Underthings: the same sort of skivvies as George wore. What if I wore a bra? he asked, for answer she grabbed his crotch. Not *too* hard.

"Fine. Say, can we have something to eat afterward with garlic?"

"Great. Hey *two* good reasons to make love *tonight!*"

Having a decent respect for the English language they did not say,

Have sex. Too bad about those who do, probably name their sons *Darren* and their daughters *Misti.* Whither goes The Language? down, down, down. Male gender. Female child. Common hangperson. *Down.*

Making love by the moonlight which poured through the gauze curtain of the window in the small pre-fab, Peggy saw . . . Peggy thought she saw . . . influence, she told herself later, of her puritan grandmother, who could only copulate behind a locked door in an otherwise empty house . . . something at the window. She gave an involuntary small sound and a start of surprise or alarm. George must have thought it (if he thought then at all) thought it a part of the passion, not only never stopped, never paused. In a moment, she had also forgotten.

"Hey," said George one night, reaching for a British pickle: "hey, who is it said, 'Imitiation is the sincerest form of flattery'? Is it Oscar Wilde?" he bit into the cowcumber.

She waited for him to mutter, as he always did, Too much vinegar and no discernable garlic at all, before answering, "It usually is."

He pointed to her whilst turning face to someone not there, Stage Left, "Say, not *bad.* Worthy of *him."* The smile vanished off his face and the rest of the morsel stayed unchewed.

Their eyes met. He broke contact, brought it back again, turned his head for the tea-pot. Coffee for breakfast: for supper, tea. *U*sually. But there had been some miscalculation of supplies, and, oh, what the hell *dif*ference did it make? "If you talk," said she, level-voiced, "I will listen." Actually, the meal was Sunday Lunch, and a coin had been tossed: what to drink. Actually, what Maugham called, *that delightful meal which in Borneo is called brunch,* when he was not forgetfully calling it, *that delightful meal which in Malaya is called brunch.* Old fart. Insisting almost to the end that he wrote for hours every morning, did he *burn* twenty years worth of writings? if not, then what had he *written?* mash-notes to sailors, probably. One single slim late flower in an empty jam-jar on the table, George had brought it back with him. The figure now coming through the door with a flower between his teeth—

"Something in the woods is watching me," George now said. Very quietly. Finished his mouthful. Poured tea. Drank.

Tick. Tock. Grandmother had always liked a very audible clock. "It is like another person in the room," said she. Tock, Tick. "What could be watching you, George?"

"Nothing," he said. "Tea too strong." Added hot water from the thermos. Took a slice of bread and applied some New Zealand butter, the NZ butter had been dehydrated if that was the word, and could not be fried; could be smeared, though. All this while she had not asked a question,

neither by voice nor face: he always preferred it that way. "Of course nothing could be watching me in the woods. Nevertheless, I *think* something *is*. I think, therefore I am." He looked straight at her, raised his eyebrows. Turned back to the food, atop the New Zealand butter put Australian jam. Slightly gesturing to the canned corned beef (Nigeria), he said, "A veritable Commonwealth meal, ah the British mustard."

"Stay home tomorrow, George."

"Old Man Coleman . . . the Mustard King? . . . said that he made his millions not out of the mustard that the people ate, but—"

"Stay home tomorrow, George. Be sick, or fake the notes."

" . . . but out of the mustard the people left on their plates; I have never faked a day off sick and I have never faked a single note and I never will. Never so weary a river but winds somewhere safe to sea; put on a record. How about Nilson, *Nobody* Cares *About the* Rail*roads* Any *more*—"

While she was putting on the record, of a sudden didn't she glance in the mirror, there he was looking hard at the calendar. There were, she knew, full three weeks before they were to break bivouac. Such is our human lack of accommodation to the immutability of time that often and often we try to mute it. Mu*tate* it? look at the calendar oft and long enough, and who knows? maybe the Pope or Parliament would have fiddled with it again, this time maybe giving everybody a couple of weeks more instead of less; is there something wrong with the arithmetic of the concept? *oh* well. Nilson's mellow melancholy voice sang about the railroads, but, like just about all of the mourners for the old trains sang nothing about the stale air, the tepid water with flecks of soot, the ugly surly trainmen, the dirt dirt dirt. . . .

Not until supper did she ask, why the question about imitation being the sincerest form of flattery. He sat up very abruptly and hissed in his breath. "It's a coarse, gross, totally stupid anecdote, I'm *not* glad you asked, but it is a reasonable question, so— I had to squat . . . who or where is it, *Even Caesar squats to cuck* . . . ?" but here she couldn't help him, sure only that it wasn't Oscar Wilde; " . . . and as always I dug a hole, right? and afterward I covered it up . . . as always . . . I even remembered that on the spur of the moment I kicked up a little divot, a hunk of turf, and planted it on top with a bawdy jovial commnet. This was to the right of my pitch. *Okay*. That was *Thurs*day. As I came along on *Fri*day, just before I got in sight of my pitch, ah, well, somehow I thought there was just a slight scuffle in the bush. Very *slight*. And just the slightest wavering in the shrubbery. So. I set up my gear . . . as usual . . . and, ah, well, an impulse . . . nothing more. . . . Just a few feet off the path, uh, to the left of my pitch—"

"To the *left*—"

"To the left—there was a hole . . . some . . . some entity," how slowly he pronounced that word: not *someone . . . something . . . some entity* . . . had dug a hole (George said, speaking very slowly), "Not dug it as well. *No* boy, nowhere near as well. But. Had. Dug. A hole. Dug it for the same purpose—"

Very quickly: How did he *know?*

Very slowly: Had. Used. It. For. The. Same. Purpose. *And* (pause)—

"Had missed it. Missed the hole, I mean. —*I* know what you're going to ask. 'Could it have been me? Couldn't I have forgotten?' Answer: No. I couldn't have. One thing, no tee pee. Another," and he gave her another reason; it was, as he had forewarned, coarse, gross. It was, also, entirely convincing. Unasked, he reviewed other possibilities; dismissed them. It was not the spoor, the scat, of the rock-monkeys. Nor of the colobus nor the vervet. Chimpanzees? had either of them ever seen or even heard of any in the region? No. Gorilla? None in any direction for hundreds of miles. A silence. She next asked, "Baboon?"

Quickly, "This is not baboon country."

A longer silence. "Now . . . this may seem silly . . . but could it be a rogue?"

A rogue baboon? All the way over here? What did one know of such? Was there ever such? "When you've dismissed the impossible," George said, "what remains, however improbable, must be the truth. Or something like that, *Hound of the—*" He did not finish, ended on a questioning tone. *Some*where in Sherlock Holmes, she murmured. And then, as she pushed over to him, with a you-finish-it gesture, the remains of the can of corned beef hash, and he shook his head a short shake and pushed it away; then, thus engaged with just about the most unmysterious object in the world, a can of corned beef *hash,* for God's sake!, almost simultaneously they exclaimed, "What remains?"

And then they stared at one another.

Next day, "I'm coming with you today, George—"

"No you're *not!*"

"I'm coming *with—*"

As she came forward, reaching for her pack (he had of course observed it before), just then, then, just then, her traitor body let both hip and thigh go *Ohh!* and she half-turned to the support of the chair; he was there in a moment, helped her sit. She wept. Not very deeply, it is true, but she did weep. "Stay here today, George," she begged, "I am sick. I need you. Take today off," and she pleaded, she pleaded; he nothing her heeded. He was all Resolution. The horse bucks you off? Mount it and ride again. You fall down? Don't just lie there: get up. She watched the flash of the white shirt, then she watched for the flash of the white shirt,

then she held a good thought for the white shirt, and for George, who wore it.

They reappeared at the usual hour, George and the shirt, vanished as usual; inside she made all ready as usual. "The figure coming through the door," she said, hugging him, hugging him, "and wearing a flowerpot hat and a rose between his teeth, was that of Sebastian Wigglebottom, the man she loved . . . " Hugged him. Hugged him.

And what happened *that* day in the woods? Oh nothing said he. George. "Probably I am suffering merely from a sort of subscutaneous dissatisfaction with myself or my career, only nor*mahl*, maybe not so much dissatisfaction as uncertainty, only to be expected as a passing phase in a man on the brink of his thirty-fourth year, wouldn't you agree? I mean, next year I'll be thirty-*five*. And you know what *that* means. The oldtime peoples had it figured out. If the days of our years are three-score and ten, equals seventy, then half-way there, eye-ee thirty-five, why that's middle age, Don't it figure? And who knows what then?"

At once, reflexively, as though goosed, Peggy said, "And then you meet Dante in the woods, and he leads you down through hell!" So soon as she had said it, see him blink furiously, his face fall, his jaw tremble. At once he caught control of himself: at o*nce*—

At once she literally laid her head upon his breast, said she was *sorry*. She was *sorry* she'd said that. Oh George. What does a man do, when a woman lays her head upon his breast? He embraces her, no? And says, Why never mind. "Why never mind, she-person. *That* would be all right. Nothing wrong with *that*. So now it's clear. Sometime after I turn thirty-five I will write my epic opus. George's *Commedia. The Monkeyana*. Say, what's for supper? I love you madly," he added, quickly.

Supper? For supper was tinned tongue, a product of Botswana. Hamming it up, Botswana *East,* says Peg. Oh that's great, says he. If there is one thing he can't stand, it's tinned tongue from Botswana *West*. "And let me mix up some exotic Coleman's Mustard in the wee mustard pottle." Sitting at meat, he commends the jelly in the tin. Eats. Silently. Of a sudden asks, "Say. Where is that folder of the Old Man's stuff?"

"In the red box," Peggy gestures. "Why?"

"Tell you by and by." He gets up and places the dirtied meat plates in the dish-pan. Sits. *She* gets up, dishes out the dessert. Koejawels in Stroep? Guayabas in Almimbar? Guavas in Syrup? Something like that. "Time for another rayroe record," says George. "You ready for another rayroe record? How about Lowell Moore singing *Ten Years Ago on a Cold Dark Night . . .* ?" The stickyfruit is savored, juicydrop by juicydrop. *The judge said, Son, have you an alibi? If you were somewhere else, then you don't have to die. But I said not a word, though it cost my life. For I had been in the arms, of my best friend's wife . . .* Although what that all

had to do with the handbrake, the high-ball, and the journalbox-lunch, scholars have yet to determine.

Dishes washed, dishes put away. Ready on the right, ready on the left. The nocturnal insects are courting in the noct. The red box with the odd, that is, the not-really-required-for-the-project notes, is gotten out. "Wasn't there a pale-yellow folder? I thought there was a pale-yellow—"

"The Old Man's stuff? Yes . . . there was . . . *here* it is. . . ."

There it was. The Project no longer uses pale-yellow folders, (a) Dr. A. Stewart Kydd, successor-pro-tem, didn't *like* the pale yellow folder, for doubtless sound reasons known (only) to Dr. A. Stewart Kydd; (b) the firm which mfged them in, of all places, Water*loo*/Ont (no period), of a sudden raised its prices. "*There* you go." Said George, Sundry, mostly, xeroxes. Xeroces? Some photographs. Some (ancient, crumbly) photo*stat*, the half-way state, white on black: a *great* way to go blind: some ineffable effing son of a bitch was too cheap to pay the extra cent to rephotostat them and make them black on white. "Yes, my children," Peggy murmured, "There was Life before the Xerox and the Canon-copier. And that was why scholars and authors were called *ink*-stained wretches," and she pointed to a smudge in the corner of a page of old Cecil Bridges' sprawling hand-written notes, even before the ball-point pen. 'Twas he who'd given them the name of Rock Monkeys, before that they'd been known as Hagenbocker's Lesser Grey Macaque. Or something. Peg always says that George made that up.

"What do you make of this?" *this* is some white scrawls on a solid black background.

"Not much to make of. It's the GOM's, for sure;" *G*rand *O*ld *M*an pronounced as one word, rhymes with Prom. "Just a Rocky. Gom wasn't really much of an artist, but it's a Rocky for sure, what else? A guenon? A proboscis? A macaque?—wasn't really much of an . . . gave *this* one a slight touch of personality, though, didn't he? Would you buy a second-hand peanut from this monkey?—just a Rocky, from down there in the Tenguato. Eh?"

Not so sure: George. And why not? Wellll . . . something about the proportion. Proportions. Suppose you saw a sketch of kitty and a tiger, without any markings on either, couldn't you tell which was which? Even with nothing to measure by, you'd note a difference between the proportions. Wouldn't you? eh? *Sure.* And then the record was turned over, and Lowell Moore sang to them about *The Wabash Cannonball.* George put the things back in the pale-yellow folder. Reluctantly? Maybe so. Maybe so.

The next day went as most days. She wrote up the notes . . . did she scan them extra-carefully? was she trying to read between the lines? in

his observation that "Boris," the Alpha Male of Group A, during the time that the so-called *monkey-fruits* were at their prime, spent more than twice as much time eating without relieving himself than otherwise, did George mean to report anything except the observed facts themselves? and what about this, *this?* "Does the presence of Rocky hair at more than half the usual distance from the ground indicate that at times the Rocky will stand on its toes and extend body very much higher in order to use tree as scratching-post: *why?*" and was there something in the very principal physical body of that note which . . . And here, feeling for one thing very silly and for another like someone imitating an old-fashioned actor imitating William Gillette as Sherlock Holmes, here she did actually get out the large magnifying-glass and examine the paper of the notes. *Imitating . . . Imitating . . . imitation . . .* ! hadn't George said something, well, asked something about that not so long ago? yes . . . George had. . . .

The notes had been done in pencil, why not, even the best of inks might unavoidably prove to blur from a drop of unexpected sweat or leftover raindrop or lizard-piss. Pencil, also: easier to erase. Look there, *there:* certainly the paper roughened by an eraser . . . an erasure . . . what had been erased? Hold the paper at an *angle,* that inner voice, sharp as any shrew's, commanded her, commanded Peggy. So she did. The sunlight, sharp itself in a way that no Temperate sunlight ever is, very clearly exposed the lines of impression in the fibers of the paper, Dick Tracy would love it. She had never trained as an Investigator of Questioned Documents, but—well—she *had.* Trained. To look carefully at usual and unusual. And her conclusion was she would shave some of the point of that very soft lead pencil which she so much liked and he so much didn't, preferring the hard lead by far; would shave it carefully and sort of shake the black dust around on the paper of the notebook, and . . . and . . .

Rocky-like hair so high up, why? WHY?

What had his instant thought been, that it was not Rocky hair but only (*Only!*) "Rocky-like," and if so WHY?

Deceit came suddenly very naturally.

Deceit, she didn't mean deceit, she meant sneakiness.

They, George and Peg, Peggy and George, changed their shirts at least once a day. And George's shirt of yesterday was in the cardboard box in the corner; where would he have *put* the suspect bit of hair, in which pocket?

Of course he hadn't left the entire tuft there; where he'd hidden it and under what code-name was another well-to-be-asked question, but. *Here* it was, the softer and almost off-white outer hairs, just two were left;

and the coarser and darker underhairs, just two were left; the combination giving a sort of a silvery color if you wanted to be romantic: sort of grey if you didn't. Exactly two of the under-hairs. Left behind clinging to the interior of the pocket, always by some universal law dating back to the looms of the Pharaohs and the Kenites, always somehow rougher than the outside of any pocket: just four hairs clutched and left behind. Coarser? They were all coarser? Kitty and the tiger. "Pile," such study was called. Such a subject was called "Pile." Pile was not much emphasized, they were ethologists and not zoölogists, weren't they? Study of Pile was important in matters of classification, but they were not (Peggy and George) taxonomists—old Kinsey was a taxonomist, had been a great authority on the classification of the gall-wasp before sliding slowly over to the consideration of the hot hump and thrust of human sexuality—what had made her think of *him?* of *that?* of "Murder and sex and other dreadful things," Grandmother had said once, fretfully summing up the content of the daily newspapers; and, at the same time, summing up Grandmother, or—rather—Grandmother's mind. Peggy and George were not taxonomists. NO.

Peggy and George were ethologists (no *n* for God's sake! "No mask? *No mask?*" no . . . no *n* in mask), they studied animal behavior; the way Physiologus had studied viper behavior? no, for old Phys had studied books: the Viper as Succubus. Incubus. Ick. She put the four unfair hairs back in the pocket and the shirt back in the box which served as soiled linen hamper. What is like is not exactly so. Not so? Maybe so.

She carefully washed her hands and carefully, not at all like Queen Victoria, sat down in her own camp-chair; there was a letter, what about it? A letter from Natalie, never to be in a rush to read a letter from Natalie, usually telling you more about penguins than you wanted to know, and so a letter from Natalie was usually set aside. Hypothetical postcard with the Mouth of the Zaire on its front: *Dear Natalie, Your letter was eaten by an aardvark* (aardvarks in Zaire? nam port. change the thought), *and so, alas—*

The letter had her rubrico or cartouche, *Assistant Nathan* cartographed or at least cursived just above the heavily engraved words *THE MUSEUM OF NATURAL PHILOSOPHY*; it meant merely that Nat was an assistant (oldspeak: secretary) to some Third Associate Curator of Stuff, but it gave, inexorably, the notion that somewhere in the mazy bowels of Old Nat Phiz there was a Chief-Nathan and a Vice-Nathan and a row of Assistant-Nathans, of which Natalie Winifred Nathan was naturally first among equals in the ranks. The Old Nat Phiz, is there anyone capable of reading those words who has never head of The Museum of Natural Philosophy? *natural philosophy* in the old sense of *physical science:* at a meeting already many years ago a new Director had

said, perhaps too briskly, "We are going to have to change the *name* of this museum!" and an old Trustee had snapped, perhaps too brusquely, "Then you are going to have to change the method of financing the Director's pay, you might try peddling peanuts in the lobby next to the picture post cards—" Name had stayed, of course.

Of *course.*

When you are trying desperately to think of Something Else, a letter from Natalie is all kinds of a godsend.

And, in this case, the source of all kinds of welcome possibilities and conjectures. Peggy read it twice in grim purpose, set it aside, baked her never-failed-to-be-appreciated Grandma cookies, using the last of this and the last of that, including the sweet butter and the vanilla extract and the mango juice and Peggy's energy, resolve, and self-control. Then she read the letter once again and then a fourth and last time (for then) with growing hope lightening heart and mind.

The gloaming came and as it gloamed she stood in the doorway and she watched and she waited and then there came as always the flash of George's shirt as he waved, emerging from the brim and brink of the Zuli Woods; he vanished into The Dip as always, and, as always, she went and did This. That. The other thing. Table setting. Candles. Flower in the jar? Still fresh, well, fresh enough.

"The figure coming through the door wearing a sable pelisse and with a corncob stuck up the funnyhole was that of Herasim Efremovitch Cock-a*dood*ledo, the man she loved," as they embraced. It was a long embrace, and, even as she rejoiced in it, she felt with dismay the rigid muscles of his back and the tenseness of his hold and grasp. "What—" she began, stopped.

Like a character in some non-Academy-level movie, he wrenched the whiskey bottle from its station, poured far *far* too much of it into a glass, and drank most of it far too fast. "The life of man," he exclaimed, half he gasped, then finished it.

Several times that afternoon had she rehearsed how she'd open the subject, the newest subject. I've *read* Natalie's letter, was to have been one way. *Guess* what Natalie writes: another.

"Felt it watching me again," George said. Sank with one abrupt sinkage into his chair; hear the frame protest. Reached for the whiskey, shook his head; not much left. "Hey, the gin," he said. "Tonic? Some. Ice?" But please don't dawdle. "*Watch*ing me again." The gin went down almost as fast as the whiskey. "No, no more," he said. She hadn't asked. "Not yet," he said. "*Christ*," he said. His favorite bamboo back-scratcher? Snapped it—once, twice. "Why are you still standing *up?*" His face, turned full toward her, was defiantly blank: brows high, mouth tight, eyes wide. She sat. Gazed.

"Watched me this morning when I was taking off my shoe to get a pebble out. Could I turn? No.—Watched me this afternoon while I was taking off my shirt to catch a breeze. Could I go after him? No. And then . . . *that!*" almost he lunged out of his chair, the wind from the gesture as he swept his hand toward the flower in the jar caused a swerve and flicker to the candles: "Throw it *out*!"

No time to ask *Why?* with the squeeze on the word which indicates the asker knows damned well *Why?* No time and no purpose.

He had found the flower's mate lying directly in his path just a few feet from his pitch. Neatly, well, almost neatly, broken off. Know what that means? Did Peggy know what that *means?* Did Peggy ever ever see or hear an account of a Rocky or any known ape or monkey plucking a flower as a flower? A chimpanzee might pluck a stalk happening to have a flower on it, might pluck it in order to strip the leaves *and* flower off it so as to stick the bare stalk into a hole to probe for ants which it (chimp) would then lick off: but this stalk had everything on it, it was a stalk of the same flowering plant which he (George) had broken off to bring home.

"Not even any of the Nationals around the Zuli," *Nationals,* that was newspeak: *Natives* one would have said in former times; "Not even any of the Nationals around the Zuli Woods would even think of plucking a flowering stalk, just isn't part of their culture."

"Well, why—"

He didn't even try to suggest why. "Watched me while I stopped to take off my shoe and shake it and watched me while I stooped to put it on again, and went away and later on came back and watched me while I stood up to take my shirt off and then I know it went away I felt it go away and then just as I started to put the shirt back on I felt it watching me again—Hey. Maybe I'd better eat a meal, huh? Sorry for all this, huh?"

Useless to describe all the faces made while he was eating or all the attempts he made not to make any faces: when he was, as he often was, awkward, Peg did hear a voice, a level voice, almost in the very holes of her ears, *Sit closer to the table,* it said. *Use both hands,* it said. *Taste it before you add salt,* said the calm voice. It was the voice of Grandmother, dead thirteen years and yet speaking out of the midst of Peggy's girlhood in the same sane, calm, level voice with which, handing Peggy a copy, a copy of Marjorie May's Twelfth Birthday, courtesy of Kotex and its makers, she had said—

But now, oh so certainly, Peggy could not remember *what* the immensely good woman had said. That time.

"Natalie Nathan wrote that the Old Nat Phiz had finally gotten the Sandler Bequest straightened out and they are getting ready to consider

the first award and Whittaker, Natalie says that Whittaker? wants to interpret that *One or more qualified candidates?* you know that line in the Bequest, she says that Whittaker wants to interpret it as a husband-and-wife team; and she says that Szabo is more or less agreeable and she says, Natalie I don't mean Szabo, says, So why don't you and I apply for it?"

Either George read her mind at one jump ahead or he saw through her mood like glass; "I've never left the work of a grant unfinished and I—"

"All the Rock-Monkeys in the *world* aren't worth—"

At length, at long length, after the high words, the tense ones, the near-shouts and quasi-cries have died down and the weepers have ceased to form on the guttering candles, it is agreed that an informal approach will be made about the Sandler Bequest and that they will. They *will.* Stick it *out.* As if nothing had happened. Was happening. Out of the way. There remained, after all, how many days? Odd how all at once neither one wanted to count the days left: damned odd. No taint as to Quitter would lie upon either of them. Peggy's arthritis? Developed during their stay here at Zuli, too bad, sure, but The Field was not essentially exclusive to the career, careers, of very experienced ethologists: particularly not if they had behind them the unquestionably grand éclat of the Sandler Bequest. The thing was not to draw attention to possible flaws, weaknesses, by any actions (or inactions) at all.

Hold fast, George and Peg. Peggy and George? Hold fast. Many a guid mon and woman had heard things which go boomp i' the nicht. Talk about it later, hey? Now—? For now—? Stiff upper lip.

Stiff lower one, too.

The next day out?

Okay.

Day after?

Okay.

"There was the curious incident of the thermos bottle in the woods, though," George said.

"The—?"

"Must've neglected to tighten it real tightly. Or maybe hadn't poured the hot stuff into it here, soon as it hotted up. Too cool, I thought, when I poured. There. So: Poured it back. Made a little fire. Heated it hot enough in the old canteen cup. Drank it down with a toast to The Queen—"

"God bless her!"

And he said the cookies were great, too!

Of course Grandmother had never had any mango juice to add.

And every two weeks it somehow or other always happened that everyone would be going somewhere else and Grandmother would be alone in the house.

Except, of course, for Grandfather.

His flashing gesture as usual there where the woods left off, and all her little detailing-attended-to: but a swift wisdom made her at once aware that even time must have a stop and there are seasons for omitting even the most well-beloved of nonsense. So all she said, as they embraced, was, "The figure coming through the door was that of George . . . the man she loved . . . "

"He's back." Was all he said. George said only, "He's back." Not *it* or any other locution. *He.* Is back.

"You felt . . . him . . . watching. . .?"

"*Oh* yeah. *Oh* yeah. Not only that. Not only that. Remember I told you how the stuff in the thermos had gotten cold? Yesterday? And I'd built a fire. Yes, well, it was just as small a fire as I could manage. I heaped up dry grass and twigs between two stones, didn't even need three. Came back there to my pitch today?" His voice this time didn't even rise by a note. "Oh, what did I do with the fire? Pissed it out. —Came back today. What. A few feet from the left of the pitch were two stones. And they weren't even set up evenly. But more-or-less piled up in between them was a pile of grass and sticks. Hap. Hazard. But there it was."

"George . . . oh . . . "

That was not all. A few feet from the *right* of the place where George pitched his non-existent tent as the base for his non-bird-watching, guess *what?* "Two *more* stones. Not that they matched. And . . . in between them? . . . Another pile of grass and sticks. And, oh I don't say Wherever I looked, because believe me that somehow I didn't care to wander around looking: must have been easily half a dozen of them. Stones. Sticks. Grass."

Silence. Silence. He didn't even go for the whiskey or the gin. *She* did. Made drinks for both of them. Stiff ones too.

"Cause and effect," George said. Sipped. Then drank deeply.

"You think he's figured it out?"

"*Oh* sure. 't's obvious. Of course he hasn't gotten it *all* figured out. Hasn't got it figured all out yet. Not yet. As yet, he can't make fire. But he's figured out that fire can be made." Neither he to her nor she to him, the next question: What next?

"Well," she said, by and by, "at least now you know it's really not your imagination—"

"Do I?"

Slowly Peg began a very token packing. Would only be a very few days. Then on the same day the Land Rover, the lorry, the Cessna would

arrive. Everything they were taking away would be packed. Everything else would be buried. Or burned, burned completely and scientifically, so that after the next rains no unsightly shambles would remain. House would be gone as well as pitch. And the places where they had been would know them no more. George watched as she moved, in her symbolic movements, and he said nothing. Did he seem relieved? He seemed to be thinking. "Unless," he said, after a long while, "unless I'm recapitulating my own anthropology . . . or something . . . "

Everything in his pack was calculated down to the last pennyweight, and she did not want to disorient him even by that much. She diminished the provisions just slightly enough to allow for a few cookies. And it seemed that that was all.

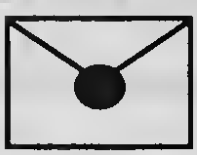
At the door, he said, "There's always somewhat of a let-down when you break bivouac. Anyone who's ever soldiered can tell you that. That's natural. But no camp lasts forever. So don't fret." A few words, sounds of love, and he was gone.

On this today she could not concentrate on reading, even reading, his notes. Time for that. Time for that. She began again to work on the packing. Slowly. Slowly. No camp lasts forever. That was a good thing to remember. Truisms became truisms because they were true. And so the day passed. And the end of the day approached. She hoped it had been not a bad day. Whatever the meaning of it all. By and by she went to the door and stood there, enjoying the sounds and scents of declining day. By and by she saw the setting sun flash on George's shirt. Sighing with relief (for it *did* seem a little later than usual) she turned and went inside. Did her doings. Waited. A bit longer than . . . he must be tired. Or why was he dragging his foot like that? *Why*—She turned abruptly.

The figure coming through the door was wearing George's shirt, and one of George's shoes. But it was not George. ●

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CURSE OF THE TIME TRRVELER'S WIFE

No telling when he'll drop by for
a spot of tea, a change of history,
a bit of the old slap and tickle.

No telling how many of him will.
Now he has folded his life so often
his mind is creased as an accordion,

so whenever his multiple personas
—youth to man to nonagenarian,
callow, arrogant, sage—congregate

for their dry heated conversations
of Möebius trips and Klein hostels,
temporal loops and fractal incisions,

she endures an endless bickering,
a devil's-advocating one another
up and down the carpet until

she feels the lines of her own life
are entrapped in the circuitous
ambulations of an Escher print.

Give me a solid man, she thinks,
some victim of foolish consistency.
Not this simmering kettle of fish

diced with yesterday's doggie bag
and next Sunday's standing rib.
Not this will-o'-the-wisp who

contradicts his own contradictions,
who worries the bird from its nest,
never hatching a lasting decision.

—Bruce Boston



John C. Wright

FARTHEST MAN FROM EARTH

Although he no longer practices law, John C. Wright, Esq., has been admitted into the New York, Maryland, and D.C. bars. Mr. Wright now works as a newspaperman for *St. Mary's Today*. He is married to the author L. Jagi Lamplighter. We believe "The Farthest Man from Earth" is his first SF sale.

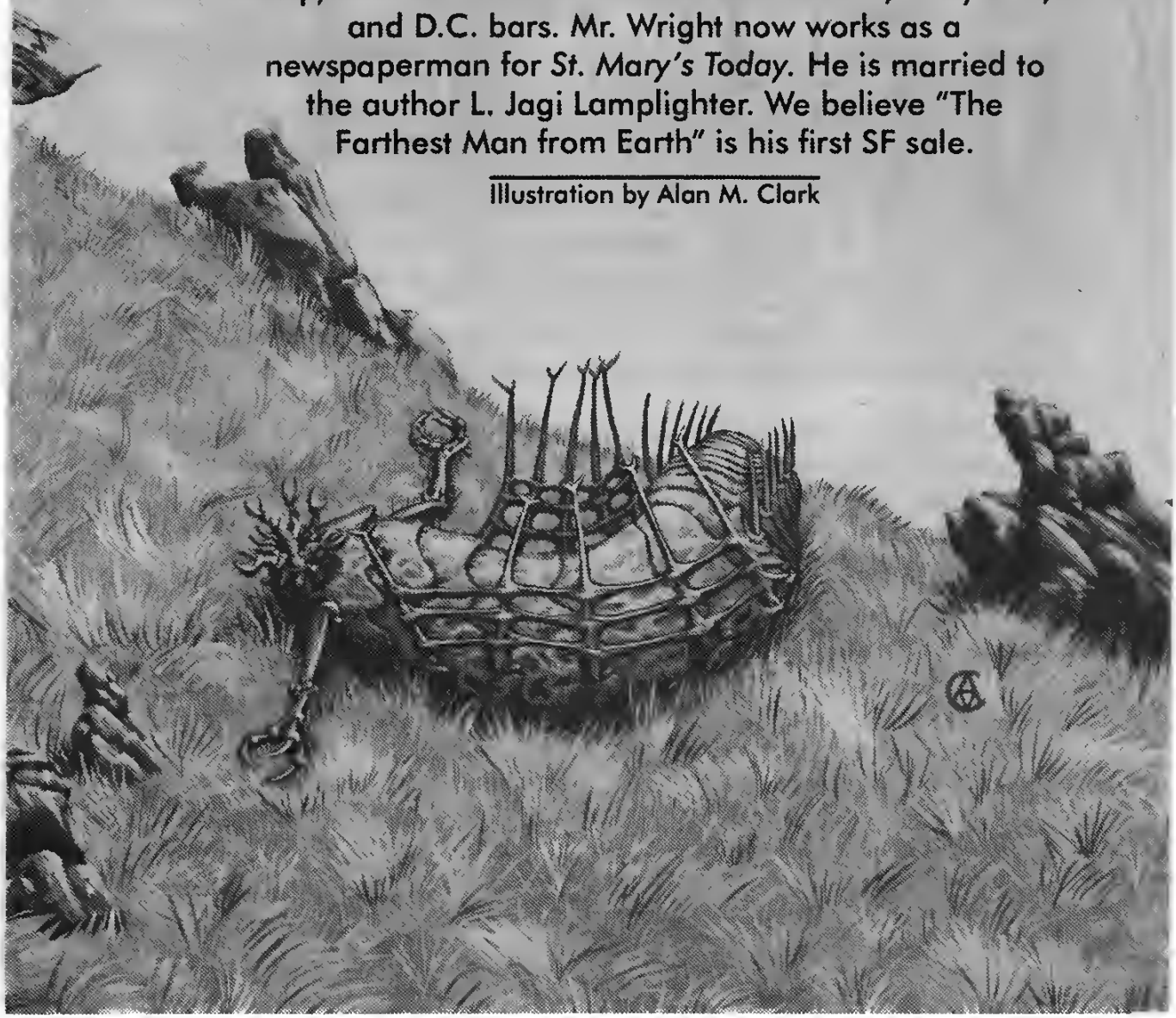


Illustration by Alan M. Clark

Beneath an unearthly dark violet sky, an old man wearing goggles, a rebreather-mask, and a cape, lay on the slope of a mountainside of gold crystal fibers.

He lay on his back, looking upward.

High overhead, vertical streamers of mauve-gray vapor rose up out of the organisms below the mountainside, striping the heavens like a tiger's hide. A sun the color of roses or old wine hung high in the heavens, surrounded by zones of luminous gas reminiscent of Saturn's rings. A dozen moons like daytime stars hovered above the clouds, burning colored points, too far away to show their disks or crescents.

The sun was 36 Ophiuchus, some twenty-three light years from Earth. The world was the fourteenth out of three dozen planets circling 36 Ophiuchus, about which also orbited gas clouds, swarms of cometary bodies, and the numberless worldlets and rocks of her four asteroid belts.

His practiced eye could find which moving point of light was the orbiting hulk of the starship *St. Anselm*. For forty years, as boy and man, he had lived aboard that ship, in transit. To do God's work, he had thought; to be among the first of all mankind to visit an alien civilization. The price of permanent exile from Earth had seemed small then, back when he still believed.

The man was Adam Drake. At the age of sixteen, he had signed aboard the star-ship *St. Anselm* as astrogator and pilot, historian and linguist. He was the first xenolinguist of history, the first man ever to have translated an utterly alien system of symbology. Had it been worth his life?

He tried to lift his head. He saw the mountain.

On the summit above him, amid outcroppings of blue-reddish masses (which looked to be boulders, but were not), glinted the dome of the expedition. Seventeen other human beings were living up there; eighteen, if one considered Father Rodriguez to be alive.

None were young enough to outlive a forty year return to Earth.

He lifted his head further. The pain was beginning to tremble through his body.

Below the dome, above him on the slope, were the aircraft hangers, surrounded by ponds of melted "snow," as far away as Earth, to him. He would not outlive the return journey.

He tried to rise, and failed. His rebreather-pack hindered his motions, as did the long flowing silver-white cape. He wore the cape because it was daytime. The expedition had, years ago, exhausted its supply of X-ray and ultraviolet ray-blocking skin cream.

It seemed a shame that the whiteness of his cape was stained with so much blood.

He fell back onto the fibers. The fibers rippled where he fell, ringing.

The season was winter at this latitude. The gold fibers tinkling and clashing in the winds attested to that. The fibers were not grass, were not even of the plant kingdom, but they did absorb light from 36 Ophiuchus. During the winter, the fibers exuded a transparent crystal tip to help focus the light into their photoreactive orange stems.

The fibers grew thick on the mountain slopes below the airstrip. He had been walking, admiring their shimmer. He had been going to visit the egg-pool of a friend, a native whom Adam had dubbed "Homer," since it was some sort of native poet or linguist. Adam Drake had once saved "Homer" from a native disease. Gratefully, "Homer" had spent much time with him, patiently helping him decode the Ophiuchan odor-language.

Adam Drake wondered if the odor of human blood would diffuse down slope far enough to reach the native encampment, or if any of the natives would be curious enough to investigate the alien smell.

Among the glittering fibers, a predator creature had been hiding. He had wounded it with his hand weapon, but not before it had mauled his legs. After biting deeply into him, the creature had staggered and choked, thrashing drunkenly, while Drake, with shaking hands, had fired again and again.

The dead predator lay nearby, a torpedo-shaped organism coated in overlapping bony plates. Fang-clusters like crab claws ringed the circular mouth; around this mouth ran a circle of photoreactive eye tissue. The claws were stained with his red blood; the eye-tissue dripped pale internal juices of the organism, where Drake's bullets had penetrated its brain-tubes. What he had taken to be reticulated leg-segments turned out to be a swarm of symbiotic creatures. Now that the host-monster was dead, the leg segments were burrowing into the organism. Some were beginning to sprout.

His hand closed over the broken shell of his radio, which lay on the crystalline grass beside him. No signal would go forth to tell the others where he'd fallen.

His hand crept to where his gun lay. He had fired several shots into the air, hoping the noise would attract attention. He conserved the one remaining shot.

His hand crept slowly back to the control valve on his rebreather pack. The control did not react. Already, the stink of the native atmosphere was beginning to burn in his nostrils.

A noise behind made him crane his head.

It came swaying up the slope, beautiful and strange, with the golden fibers of the ground rippling and chiming about it.

It was a tall, flowerlike being, mincing delicately on ten thin radial legs. About the trunk were furled multicolored fans of membranelike wings. A circle of hearing diaphragms formed a crown around the eyeless, mouthless head. Atop the crown, sensitive antennae, like fronds, tasted the wind. All about the creature's crown danced swarms of glistening insects, like fireflies. Manipulator prongs, on slender limbs like plant-stalks, were held up above. The creature was taller than a man.

Adam Drake could not recognize who this was without seeing the patterns on the wings. Even then, he could not be sure, since the patterns sometimes changed. Was this Homer, coming to see what had delayed him?

Adam Drake reached out a hand toward the Ophiuchan. "Help me!" he called, futilely. He knew any sound he made was much too shrill for Ophiuchan ears to register. Even if it were his friend, the creature might not recognize him in a prone posture.

The creature raised three crooked legs and extended its toe-hooks; a menacing gesture. But then it unfurled the membranes between its prongs and wings, displaying an intricate pattern of gold and black that Adam Drake recognized. It was Homer.

Homer scuttled forward, and reached down with its toe-hooks to grasp the fabric of Adam Drake's day-cloak. As Homer picked him up, the movement sent shocking pains through Adam's legs and chest.

Fainting, he looked up, and saw the Ophiuchan's petallike wings rise up above its feathery crown and fan out to shade him from the blazing light of the ringed, rose-colored sun. Sunlight shimmered through the translucent wings, glinted on the golden skin-plates of the upright body.

That was the last thing that he saw.

Two intelligent yet nonhuman organisms perched on a hillside beneath a sky, which, to human eyes, would show an imperial purple color. The two intelligences were surrounded by an array of organisms which might be called a forest; many of the organisms in the array had sheaths or fans of material which they exposed to their sun, 36 Ophiuchus, to use the solar energy in a variety of internal chemical reactions, none of which used chlorophyll. Most of the organisms were not ambulatory, but those that were stepped with soft, slow regular motions, holding fronds high, and walked in great sweeping curves.

Some of the internal chemical reactions for certain phyla in the array were violently exothermic. Colored sparks flew up, and here and there, streams of escaping gas, like vertical cloud banks.

The two intelligent organisms stood on a layer of shell casings shed by an underground colonial life-form whose ridges and angles underlay most of the landscape. The intelligent organisms too had sheaths of tissue that used sunlight for certain processes; these sheaths were extended like layered butterfly wings from the legs and stalks of the intelligences. Between the intelligences and the forest-array, groups of tiny flying creatures darted and swarmed continuously, glinting like gems.

The swarms were necessary, but not essential, for certain biological processes related to the reproduction and metamorphosis of certain parts of the intelligences, and also of the forest-array creatures.

The posture and situation of the intelligences excited certain channels in their nerve-structures which would otherwise be dormant. These structures retained patterns of past behavior, and produced symbolic and aesthetic formulations of those structures. While these intelligences had more levels of consciousness than a man's nervous system, they, too, had a system of emotions, based on symbolic associations. This system could, analogously, be called "art" or "religion," but only if no one insisted on very exact definitions of the terms.

According to their symbological system, because the shell casings were odorless—the spent residue of a once vital process—this standing place symbolized death. Because the forest-array discharged swarms of odiferous flying creatures related to sexual processes, this location also symbolized life.

Both intelligences admired the aptness of their place and posture. For they had come to this place to discuss the life and death of their world.

Because of the excitement of those nerve-channels, which were usually dormant, this spot and stance, and the scene, held a rich and wild, almost dangerous beauty.

A man might also have thought it sublime, had one been there to see the long curving corridors of dancing tree-creatures swirling in their slow pavanes, and seen, here and there, a tree-creature with burning fire in its horns dancing alone, sending up sparks and streamers of colored smoke. A man might have wondered at the weird geometry of the soil, until he saw outcroppings of the underground colony creature, like arms of coral, kraken-postured and crooked, glistening blue-red in the light of 36 Ophiuchus.

But an unprotected man would not have long enjoyed the beauty; the high atmospheric pressure would have deafened him, many of the hydrocarbon gasses the creatures produced were toxic, and the atmosphere did not block out wavelengths of light dangerous or fatal to man.

Man, in fact, was what the two intelligences were discussing. The first intelligence had the long horns and branching prongs of an arboreal highlander. Among its artificial and natural scent-codes and perfumes were identifiers of its status, its code, and its affinity, including an odor produced by glands exposed to the cold and lower pressure of the mountain peaks. Human words cannot accurately translate the meaning of the scent-codes, but in general, the odors indicated the owner's profession to be one who, with the mind, by communicating, seeks to imitate the organization and harmony of nature. A close human analogy would be to call this intelligence a poet, or a philosopher, or an ecologist.

The second intelligence smelled of sea-brine, and exuded odor that showed its diet consisted mainly of microscopic oceanic organisms rather than wind-born spores. The second intelligence had a rougher posture, thicker prongs, and stood with several legs angled wide, as if poised to jump in any direction. The fluids of this world's oceans were less dense than water; the tidal actions of several large moons made the seashore a dangerous place. Related organisms, as well as members of the same race in an aquatic and less intelligent phase of their life cycle, inhabited the seas, and were cunning and violent. That the second organism smelled and stood as it did was a sign of almost legendary ruthlessness and courage. Its outer layers of integument had been artificially hardened with boiled lacquer, and it carried, woven among its mid-body fibers, strands of incense meant to mask its personal odor. The profession of this creature was evident by its stance and lacquer. It could be called a warrior only by analogy, since, while this race did have organized and

violently homicidal conflicts, they were not organized like human wars. A closer analogy would be to call the creature a child-stealer, an iconoclast, one who interfered with the consummation of another's sexual practices, an arsonist and poison-breeder.

The poet initiated the conversation. Its scent-glands exuded a waft of the odor of human sweat, plastic and metal. The imitation was not good, but the warrior recognized the signal as referring to mankind. It was an imitation of how humans, in their pressure-suits, smelled to the Ophiuchans.

The warrior unclasped its incense-strands and swished its wings to clear the odor. The meaning of this gesture was to communicate the idea that there were mysteries whose clouds must be dispersed.

The two odors mingled. The combined odor symbolized the mystery of the human kind.

The poet touched its scent-paint with a prong and extended it toward the warrior, as if to accuse it of being a poet. This, because the poet was favorably impressed with how the warrior had discarded its masking perfume, which it did in order to communicate without the masking perfume clouding its meaning, yet had made the discarding gesture part of the communication performance.

The warrior breathed out the scent a youth might make, clear and sharp, but of small quantity. Between another pair of cupped wings, it breathed the scent an adult would make, rich and mingled with subtle under-scents. Between a third pair, it breathed a feeble smell, mingled with salt-smells as if from faulty glands of an older post-sexual adult. A slow flurry of these wings combined the odors and wafted them toward the poet. The meaning of this was that time was passing, and that events were mingled and confused. At first, the poet thought that the warrior was merely expressing impatience with the poet's compliment, saying there was no time for such niceties. But when the cloud merged with the odors already present, the meaning became: Men grow old.

The warrior exuded an odor of human blood. The meaning became: Men grow old, and bleed.

The poet dipped a prong into its water-gathering gland and held it up with a slow, crooked gesture. The water was odorless, like the shell-casings they stood upon. The meaning: Men grow old, and bleed, and die.

The warrior folded its crown fronds, but emitted no scent of confusion. Members of its profession gave no outward show of confusion. Nonetheless, the warrior did not at first understand why the poet used scentless water as a symbol for death, rather than the more usual scent of decay, and metamorphosis.

Then the warrior realized that the poet meant to imply that humans had no life-cycles, underwent no metamorphosis, and that, when they died, they would emit no scent of decay because Ophiuchan microorganisms could not decompose humans. The warrior also understood a second level of meaning, more subtle. The mythical world of the humans, so the humans claimed, was a world covered in water. The poet's gesture was

a symbol for the shocking alienness of the human world, the human way of life.

The warrior understood a third level of meaning to the poet's gesture. It was a request for odorlessness. The poet wished to clear the air of the previous messages.

The request was so elegantly woven into the other messages of the poet, yet communicated in such a novel way, that the warrior did the poet the honor of flailing its wings to clear the air. The warrior had known rumors of this poet, and favorable reports. It now knew those reports to be true.

The two organisms stood, waiting for the perfume of the previous conversation to settle. They had chosen a traditionally wise spot to stand for conversation; the shell-castings allowed no other scent to seep up from the ground or forest array to disturb the speech-smells. The coming and going of the darting fliers tended to erase past messages. Conversations were swift, taking hours rather than days.

When the poet was ready, it combined the odors of springtime, exaggerating the odor of feather-fronds of a certain species which had been numerously blooming three springtimes ago. The poet lifted its prongs toward the sun. This was a time-statement, an opening gesture, establishing when the events about to be shown took place. As it lifted its prongs, the poet's colored wings stood up, a menacing gesture. Odors hidden beneath the wings now wafted forth. The scent of conversation-rope, and incense, indicating friendship or alliance, the scent of metal and plastic, with specific odors and tones, indicating a specific human being, one of the humans who lived in the small metal shell on the mountain top, where the air pressure was low and the poisons of the forest-array were diffused.

The warrior had not scented this particular human before, but it imbedded the scent on the conversation rope woven through its ventral fronds, so that it would remember.

Three years ago, the poet had met that human. The poet pointed again at the sun, and scraped the ground with several of its legs. Sounds, unlike scents, had no duration, and were used as symbols of immediate occurrences. The poet's time statement now spoke of recent events. Since the human smell still lingered, he was the subject of the statement.

The warrior now scented, coming from behind another wing of the poet, the smell of a harrier-beast on the hunt. It was a creature which hunted by eyesight alone, a dangerous predator, because it could not be deceived by camouflage-scents. The poet's depiction of the smell was so realistic that the warrior involuntarily folded its wings. The warrior did not raise its prongs, restraining itself in time.

It had folded its wings that they might not be torn in combat, but the gesture was also, among the highlanders, a symbol of attention and respect, for folded wings could not inadvertently fan away or disturb another's message.

Suddenly, from behind the uplifted wings of the poet, two swarms of

fliers spread out, controlled by the poet's pheromones. The poet had stroked the fliers' wings with scent-codes, smelling of danger, fear, metallic iron, the harrier-beast, human blood, anguish, and pain.

The Ophiuchans could see, but their photoreceptors were symbiotic insects which lived on or near their skin-layer. The insects were phototropic, and different species had been bred to react to different colors and intensities of light. The Ophiuchans could smell the insects' internal chemical changes caused by the phototropy. Their eyesight was thus more diffuse and less coherent than a man's. To the warrior, the sudden motion of the swarms being shaken from the poet's wings was startling and alarming indeed, and created bewilderment and anxiety. The warrior knew some part of the fear that the poet had felt when the human, evidently a friend or ally, had been mauled by a harrier-creature.

The poet began to lower its wings; a gesture of despair. From along the upper reaches of the wings came other scents: the smell of disinfectant, and of the worms used by physicians; the rich smell of human skin, not covered by plastic and metal; the ripe, harsh smell of a nonhuman emotion, an emotion which indicated a reckless and suicidal desire to achieve and succeed at any cost; the scent-code of another Ophiuchan highlander, one the warrior did not recognize; the smell of violence and death; and finally, a beautiful, wondrous odor, the most lovely perfume in the warrior's knowledge.

The warrior had smelled that scent once before, when, as a child, after its first metamorphosis, it had emerged all dripping from the sea, with its gill-membranes shedding from it. A group of adults had found it, and introduced into its nervous system the symbiotic life-form which healed its wounds, extended its life, and increased the number of convolutions in its brain-tubes. The smell was the smell of the symbiotic ambiot.

But the ambiots could not be removed without killing the host. The horror of the poet's story became clear. The poet had taken the wounded human to a highland physician, and, in the midst of the operation, overcome by the passion to save the man's life at any cost, the poet had killed the physician and introduced the physician's ambiot into the human being's nervous system.

As the poet continued to lower its wings, another scent grew stronger. The scent of the human being grew stronger, healthier, mingled with the beautiful perfume of the ambiot. The smell of youth, endless youth, floated down through the odor of the healthy man.

Then, as an afterthought, one flier floated from the poet's crown, bearing the scent of harrier-beast poisoned and decayed. The foolish monster, unable to smell the otherworldly chemistry of the human, had taken in mouthfuls of human blood when it mauled the man, and been poisoned. The man had been healed, perhaps granted eternal youth; the beast attacking him had died.

The poet's wings were now utterly folded, its crown bowed, in a posture of anguish and despair.

The warrior rattled its fronds in confusion. The scents for confusion

and disbelief, and for humans mixed with ambiots, welled up from the warrior's glands. The warrior showed its disbelief at the idea that ambiots could cure or heal humans, or thrive in human body chemistry.

The poet did not move or respond, but stood bowed in despair.

The warrior gathered a flier and embedded a cluster of eye-spots onto it with a glue from its conversation-rope. The warrior sent clusters of fliers off toward the metal bubble in the mountains where the humans lived, by chemically inducing the fliers to follow the scent from its rope.

The warrior wakened its "waiting mind," which made its sense of time passage dormant. Days, or perhaps weeks, went by, unnoticed, uncounted, by the hibernating warrior. The warrior grew alert again when the eye-spot-bearing fliers returned. Brushing its fronds across the eye-spots, it saw the healed human, an awkward, bizarre, bilateral creature, thick-legged, with no animals, pets, or plants living in his hair or on his skin.

The images showed an unhealthy man, scarred, one-legged, with gray hair and white artificial skins. The next images showed the man with black hair, unscarred, with two legs of unequal size. The next group of images showed a man with legs of equal size.

The warrior carefully picked the man's scent out from the wing hairs of the fliers and compared it to the scent imbedded in the fibers of the conversation-rope. There was no doubt. It was the same individual man.

But the men had claimed that their limbs could not grow back. . . .

Faintly, among the wing hairs of the fliers, the warrior's fronds could pick out the faintest trace of the sweetest scent it knew. . . .

Because the poet had not moved for so long, the warrior wondered if there was a meaning to its posture it had not guessed. The warrior gathered a cluster of eye-spots in concentric circles on its ventral surface, each ring sensitive to a different color, and sent the fliers, still carrying eye-spots, to examine the poet from all angles.

The poet had bent over to touch a prong to the ground. The warrior had not noticed this before, because the prong was covered with water, and scentless. The claw of the prong was extended, a battle-sign.

The meaning was clear. The world of men, the alien world of water, was coming to this place. Battle was coming to this place. Death was coming to this place.

The grief and defeat of the poet's posture was plain. The men could fly, and had machines no one could understand or combat, all of which smelled the same.

The warrior gently stirred its wings in the air. Its message was nothing like the graceful dance of the poet's. The warrior simply turned, opening the scents it had gathered in its wings one at a time. The scent for alliance, for the man, and for conversation-rope rose up in the air. Then the warrior flailed its wings, dispersing the message, the gesture for silence. It gathered its masking-incense with its leg-hooks, a gesture for secrecy. The message: that the human was the poet's friend, and might be conversed with and convinced to keep silent.

The poet did not rise or move, other than to open its crown-fronds, as if scenting the air. It was a gesture of curiosity, meaning, "what if?" The poet was asking, What if the human would *not* be silent?

The warrior folded its wings back and raised its prongs. Moments later, the smell of human blood softly began to radiate from the warrior's body.

A single drop of water, like a tear, dropped from the bowed poet's down-thrust claw, and noiselessly fell to the shells.

The poet straightened, folded its wings, sheathed its claws. It sent groups of eye-spots away before it, raised itself on its leg members, and began to stalk toward the mountains, where the humans were.

The warrior anointed itself with camouflage-scent from a branch it carried, lifted its legs, and delicately stalked after the poet, staying down-wind.

The scent of human death, like the echo of a fading conversation, slowly dispersed in the wind, and soon the air where they had perched was empty.

Adam Drake's eyes were bright and vital. His grey hair had shed, replaced with luxurious glossy black hair, that he wore long. He sat with a relaxed alertness, upright but not stiff. Instead of a day cloak, he wore a loose black surcoat which left his limbs free. The cells of his skin had produced a dark gold melanin to block the ultraviolet and X rays. His chest was broader; certain of the convolutions in his lungs had grown osmotic tissue to enable him to breath the native air with less discomfort.

Adam Drake sat at one end of the long steel table of the shipmoot. The table had fifty chairs, one for each of the original members of the expedition. Where a member, through accident or old age, had passed away, a wreath of black winter fiber hung, tied with dark blue ribbon. The fiber had been cut at solstice, when the chips of crystal at their glassy tips were as large as gemstones and shone amongst the black woven wreaths like little stars.

By unspoken common impulse, the other fifteen people had seated themselves at the far end of the table. They were a gray and withered group, with white and nodding heads, quivering thin hands, dim, vague eyes, loose and wrinkled mouths. On Earth, men between sixty and eighty could be healthy, fit, and active, and not show their years. On 36 Ophiuchus XIV, the air, the food, the sun, and the soil were not intended for mankind, and not conducive to his better health.

The Rector had aged gracefully. His face was stern and lined with care; his hair was white as snow. He sat in his wheelchair as stiffly as a king upon his throne. "We are come together to determine what we shall broadcast in our next report to Mother Earth."

Sister Aetia was hag-faced, almost hidden in the brown folds of her habit. She said, "Wait. We must wait for Solomon Rourke to return from hunting. He may have something to say." She turned a sly and bitter

glance toward Adam Drake's leg, which had, during the past three months, entirely regrown, nerves, muscle, bone. Envy was in her eyes.

Drake thought: Solomon Rourke must now be an ally of hers. Rourke could no longer be trusted.

The Reverend Doctor Cuillian, Chief Surgeon, had long white hair and a beard which he let grow uncut. His eyes were dulled by a pale film. His white walking-stick lay on the table before him. He gripped the table with his strong hands. The head of his white walking stick contained a radar circuit whose read-out formed in dots of Braille under the handle of the cane, where Doctor Cuillian's fingers naturally fell. He spoke in a gentle voice:

"Sister Aetia, let us begin, I pray. I have grievous news that does not directly touch Deacon Rourke."

The Rector said, "Is it Brother Rodriguez?"

Doctor Cuillian nodded his head. "I could not halt the deterioration. My skill was of no avail. He is gone."

The Rector held up his hand. "I hold the shipmoot suspended for one minute. For the passing beyond of our brother Rodriguez, the company shall silently pray."

With solemn deliberation, all gathered at the table folded their hands and bowed their heads, except Adam Drake, sitting at ease, who did not.

In that moment of quiet, the door was thrust open with a clatter, and Solomon Rourke stood in the gap. He had left the outer lock wide open, and the glare of 36 Ophiuchus fell over his shoulders, and spilled into the room. The thin cold stinking wind whirled around him, fluttering his daycloak, and tossing his iron gray hair.

Rourke had thrust the door open with his foot, and now strode into the chamber's gloom, the beams of acetylene sunlight shining from his day cloak. With both arms, he bore a grisly burden, and walked with heavy step, bowed backward a little under its weight.

The company rose with gasps of astonishment or little sighs of revulsion or shock as Rourke threw the corpse down upon the table, a corpse smelling of inhuman incense and driveling white alien blood.

All rose up in shock, except the Rector, who could not, and Adam Drake, who did not. Adam Drake did nothing but nod severely, as if completely unsurprised.

The alien corpse sprawled wetly on the table, and a quartet of manipulator prongs fell open and pointed toward Drake, like skeletal parodies of human hands, fallen open while reaching for help.

Rourke spoke:

"I used Adam Drake's machine to speak with the Pale Linear Scent Priest-Kings. Their surgeons say that Rodriguez will die. The ambiosis organism must be trained and adapted by contact with their brain-tubes in order to be flexible enough to enter symbiosis with our chemistry. They say that untrained ambiosis organisms can only be put into children."

Rourke looked back and forth across the table; some met his eyes, some did not. Solomon Rourke was in excellent shape for a man his age,

a condition he maintained by stint of remorseless exercise. He stood, head thrown back, arms folded on his chest, which was still slick with alien fluids. On his back hung a musket and powderhorn, at his side swung a sabre of osmium titanium alloy. Solomon Rourke loved hunting so well that he had threatened to exhaust the expedition's entire supply of ammunition until the Rector had denied him further use of it. Rourke had made himself a musket in the machine-shop and mixed his own powder. He had not yet contrived a workable revolver, or cartridge bullets. The sword he had lathed for use after his one shot had been fired.

In a harsh quiet voice, Doctor Cuillian said, "You are too late, Deacon Rourke. Yesterday we took Brother Rodriguez off life-support, and surgically introduced the ambiotic creature you had caught in the wild. The wild ambiot seemed to all our tests to be identical to the one living in Mr. Drake's nervous system. But the wild ambiot did not cure Brother Rodriguez or make him grow younger. Cancerous cells began to grow in his lymph nodes; viral organisms began to reduce the electrochemical balance in his nerve cells. Mutant cells multiplied; his glands began releasing random amounts and mixtures of hormones. It was almost as if the ambiot were trying at random to force Rodriguez's body to duplicate the chemical system of an Ophiuchan. Rodriguez did not survive our attempt to remove the creature. Once introduced into symbiosis, electroneural actions become dependant on the ambiot. They cannot be removed without lobotomizing the host."

The Rector gazed at Solomon Rourke, and pointed to the corpse. "And what is the meaning of *this*?"

"I brought it for Rodriguez. It's one of the Nonlinear Dark Scent spore-nomads from the eastern flame-tree country. The Linear Pale Scents found it discharging birthing-ink into an eel-pool, which is some sort of ritual infraction, like a political crime; they think it a murderer. I bought it from the Linear Pale Gaoler with my bottle of after-shave."

The Rector said, "They killed him? Or did you?"

"What does it matter?" asked Rourke, glaring down.

"If they did it, you are a corpse-buyer, no more. If *you* did it, you are a slaver and a murderer."

Adam Drake felt his ears popping. A shrill wind still whistled in the open lock. The pressure-alarm, belatedly, began to ring. Solomon Rourke strode over and pulled the outer door shut. He threw off his stained cloak and hung it on a hook in the lock. The air pumps silently began to lower the pressure to normal.

Doctor Cuillian tilted his head toward the corpse. "I hear a noise."

Solomon Rourke returned to the chamber, still wearing (so Adam Drake noticed) his saber. Rourke said, "It trembled and hissed as I held the corpse in my arms, and made a scraping noise from within, all the while I climbed the mountainside. The ambiot is still alive."

Sister Aetia said, "Quickly! We must put it in nutrient! I need it alive. . . . I want it . . . . for scientific study, of course."

A dozen voices spoke at once. "*I* want it too!" "For me!" "For love of God, Rourke!" "I need . . ." "Young again!"

The Rector rapped his ring on the table. The polished steel surface rang like a gong. "The company will come to attention and order! Be seated!"

Aetia spoke quickly. "Forgive me, Rector, but we must preserve the specimen at all costs. It may be dying now that its host body is dead. Why should *Adam Drake* be the only one who . . ."

Adam Drake leaned forward and threw aside a fold of the cloth draping the creature. The way the cloth had fallen, only Adam Drake, alone at his side of the table, had been able to see the corpse's crown with its radially symmetrical array of scenting-fronds, listening diaphragms, and breathing valves. When he pulled the cloth aside, the table fell silent.

Dr. Cuillian said, "What is this sudden hush? Tell me what you see . . ."

Adam Drake said, "There is a bullet hole in the dead Ophiuchan's respiration fibers . . ." Adam Drake frowned, and carefully smelled his fingers where they had touched the cloth.

Adam Drake could understand only part of what he smelled. It was a death-curse delivered against the alien's murderer, written in the long-range odor language of the Nonlinear Dark spore-nomads. It was a cry for help, as well as an injunction that any who understood the message be compelled to avenge the murder.

Solomon Rourke said grimly, "I will not disguise the fact that I shot the creature. It would not follow me uphill. I shot its breathing membranes out to avoid damaging its brain tubes, where the ambiot dwells. It suffocated as I watched, and emitted smells. I had my mask on, and did not know what it said, or care."

The Rector said, "Oh! Solomon . . . for shame!"

"I have not sinned, Rector. God will be my Judge. It was a choice between this monstrosity, whose life meant nothing to me, and Brother Rodriguez, my friend and comrade. My only sorrow is that I failed. Why do you all stare at me? Should I feel compassion for this insect-tree while Rodriguez lay dying on life-support?"

The Rector said, "Heaven requires of us compassion for *all* creatures, Deacon!"

"Compassion?" Rourke flipped the cloth up to cover the corpse again. "*Mankind* is my race. I am a *man*. Compassion for *men* condemns these creatures to death. It is Nature's will . . ."

Sister Aetia stood up, interrupting, "If you have not need of it, Deacon Rourke, let me take it to the infirmary and save the ambiot. Shame if it should die while we talk! Dr. Van Wenk, grab a bundle of legs, and help me haul it . . ."

Otto Van Wenk was the master technician, electronicist, and nucleonicist, who, since the death of certain doctors years ago, had trained himself to be nurse and surgical assistant. He was a thin man, bald, with thick spectacles (the expedition had no facilities to grow contact lens implants). Years ago, the bone-marrow of his right leg had been infected

with a native spore, and his leg had been amputated below the knee. He wore a complex electronic prosthesis he had built himself, and programmed with pressure-pads and gyroscopes to move and balance itself like a foot.

Otto Van Wenk was a practical man. "I will help you haul it if you implant the ambiot in me. Then, when I am young again, and have two legs, I will acquire an ambiot for *you* . . ."

"Fool! Rourke gave it to *me*! Me!"

"Be practical. You are the better surgeon. I have more need. Who else will perform the operation on you? Dr. Cuillian, who is blind? Or Dr. Voltaire, who is an . . ."

The Rector raised his hand. "Stop!" he commanded. And they stopped. The Rector looked at both Aetia and Van Wenk. "Is it any part of Christian Charity, or Brotherhood, to squabble like vultures over a corpse? We have no medical evidence of how much longer Adam Drake will live. Some incompatibility with alien biochemistry may strike him down in a week or a month, or when his diet changes, or when the season does. Is his state so much to be envied that you would cast away your humanity in order to gain it?"

Dr. Emilio Voltaire had had his head bowed down, as if napping. Now he jerked it upright. "An idiot!" he said in his strange, harsh voice. "Van Wenk. You were about to call me an *idiot*."

Dr. Voltaire was a Jesuit, and eighty years old. The left half of his face had a stiff lack of expression; only the right side of his mouth moved in speech. His left hand lay curled, numb and motionless on the table. His right hand held the long staff he used to walk. He said, "I know I used to be smarter than I am now. None of you say it, but I know. I found my diaries from before my stroke. I read what I said would happen to me. There were things I couldn't read. Tricky, Latin things, and long words. But I read my own diagnosis. I was a doctor back then. My prefrontal and occipital lobes have been damaged. The next stroke may kill me . . ." Dr. Voltaire looked blank for a moment as if his thoughts had wandered away. Then he said, "Deacon Rourke, we will make a deal. Let me be young again. Let me be as smart as I used to be. Then I can do the operation, because I'll be smart again. I can implant them in everyone else. We'll *all* be young. I'll be a surgeon again, and have something to *do*." And he whispered to himself, "Not just be waiting to die . . ."

But they all heard the whisper, as the chamber was utterly silent when he spoke. The comment seemed to strike the Rector with particular grief. "My old friend . . . my old friend . . ." he said softly.

Sister Aetia said, "Let us at least get the specimen into a nutrient before it dies! We can discuss what to do with it later! Van Wenk, help me with this!" And she pulled on the creature's thorax.

Even with Van Wenk's help, the two of them staggered under the load. Solomon Rourke came forward silently and put his shoulder to the burden, unmindful of the alien blood and juices which dribbled into his hair and across his shoulder and chest.

The Rector sat with his head bowed, as if involved in solemn meditation. Dr. Voltaire rose, blinking, and limped vaguely from the room, murmuring to himself. He had wandered away from the shipmoots before, without being excused, and no one seemed to notice.

Except Adam Drake. He was sitting back in his chair, legs crossed at the ankles, in a relaxed pose. But his eyes missed no detail. He had seen Solomon Rourke pause to retrieve his musket.

Adam Drake spoke. "Rector! Stop them!"

But the Rector said nothing. Aetia, Rourke, and Van Wenk were gone.

"Rector," said Adam Drake, "You must make the ruling that anyone who has an ambiot implanted in them will be executed. Otherwise, the incentive to kill the Ophiuchans will be too great. *Any* other punishment, no matter how severe, will be as nothing compared to the promise of eternal life."

Dr. Cuillian cocked his head. "How strange for you to urge this, Mr. Drake. You *yourself* would be condemned by the very rule you propose! Or do you expect that, now that *you* are immortal, that gift should be reserved to you alone, and never shared?"

"I urge capital punishment, and offer myself as the first victim. Otherwise 36 Ophiuchus XIV is doomed."

The Rector stirred and said, "Doomed? Even if each of us here became young again, that would entail the death of only fourteen Ophiuchans."

"What of Earth?"

Dr. Cuillian said, "Earth will not receive the signal that we broadcast when we landed here for fifteen years, even supposing that the National Geographic Orbital Radiotelescope is still there to receive it! News broadcast now to Earth would not reach it for twenty years. A vessel launched immediately would not arrive here for forty years after *that*. But such vessels take years to build and provision. We speak of something seven decades in the future, at the very least.

"But this assumes that they will *send* such a vessel," Dr. Cuillian continued, "which they will not. Do you recall the world we left behind? A world of dispassionate and intellectual men, selfish, money-loving, and agnostic. Why do you suppose that we, the last remnant of the Christian Church on Earth, were the only ones who could be found to go to 36 Ophiuchus? Because there can be no economic reason for space travel, no worldly gain if you cannot outlive the round-trip. The men of Earth care only for profit. No profit will tempt them so far."

"Except for the secret of eternal youth," said Adam Drake. "Which will allow them to outlive the returning voyage."

The Rector said, "Then we must not broadcast what we discover to the Earth."

"That is not enough," said Adam Drake. "The civilization that will spring up from we fourteen may repair and re-equip the *St. Anselm*, and fly to visit Mother Earth. The secret will then be known."

Cuillian's hands tightened on his white walking stick. "Mr. Drake! Dr. Voltaire is sick *now*. This very day! His next stroke may take his life.

He has at best a year or two to live. The contingencies you fear are unthinkably remote. Well into the middle of the next century, at least, generations from now!"

"Not unthinkable to me," said Adam Drake. "*I* will be there then. Perhaps my new youth has changed my thinking: no future seems remote." And he turned to the Rector. "All these things will come to pass unless you stop it *now*. Make the ruling!"

Dr. Cuillian reached out his hand blindly. "No, Rector, do not! For such a cruel and heartless rule will condemn Dr. Voltaire to death—yes, he, and *all* of us! To rob a man of eternal life is the same as to murder him!"

"To aid a murderer is also murder, Doctor," said Adam Drake. "Even if the aid you give is no more than to cause delay."

The Rector said, "Who is guilty here? Rourke? He shall be punished. Whom else do you accuse?"

"Listen. I know Dr. Cuillian heard it. His ears are very sensitive. The dynamo has changed pitch. They are drawing power in the infirmary, energizing the surgical machines and fields. Make your ruling, Rector, before they begin the operation! Once the ambiot is implanted, it cannot be removed without the death of the host!"

The Rector opened the lid of his wristwatch. "Be it known to all men, this Two Hundred and Thirtieth day of the Forty-Eighth year since Launch, that by the authority of God and of His supreme Pontiff on Earth, Pope Urbane XXIII, in whose name I act, it is henceforth unlawful and unconscionable to administer, implant, or suffer to be implanted, either in oneself or another, any alien biological material of any kind taken from any corpse . . ."

Dr. Cuillian said, "Rector, wait! Have pity on us, the blind, the crippled, the idiotic! Would you condemn us to struggle hopelessly on without a cure, now that a cure has been found? Let there be pity in your heart!"

Adam Drake said, "Ignore pity. The innocent do not need pity; it only aids the guilty."

The Rector held his watch cover down for a moment, and said, "I will accept both your counsels, gentlemen, but only in part. I will feel pity for those Ophiuchans whom my rule shall protect." He opened his watch and continued speaking ". . . and for the infraction thereof, the punishment will be . . ."

"Death!" Adam Drake said.

The Rector covered his watch. "So harsh?"

"Nothing less will serve."

"You condemn yourself as well, Adam."

"To save a world? I would give up my life for that."

"No, Adam. I will not kill you."

"Haven't I warned you against pity?" Drake said angrily.

The Rector opened his watch ". . . exile. So ordered by my voice, and duly recorded this day by me, Alexandros Bromion, Rector of the Mission of St. Anselm, Star-voyager, to baptize and Christianize the Ophiuchan

Race." The indicator light immediately flashed, to show that the computer on board the *St. Anselm* had acknowledged and recorded his words. He frowned gravely, and he snapped the watch-cover shut.

"Mr. Drake! My signal has not reached the *St. Anselm*. The return sign came too swiftly. The *St. Anselm* is several light-seconds away. Someone is falsifying the broadcast. This cannot be tolerated. Go in my name and order them to stop the operation. The legs of my wheelchair would take many minutes to climb those stairs."

Adam Drake stood. "They won't listen to me. Aetia, Van Wenk, and Voltaire are members of the medical house, and under Dr. Cuillian's command."

The Rector said, "Go with him, doctor, and halt them."

But Dr. Cuillian did not move. He shook his white and shaggy head slowly.

The Rector said, "Do you disobey? What of your oath of obedience to the Order, to the mission, to the church?"

"I took my Hippocratic Oath before I was confirmed in my vow to the Ship. No matter what I think of the immorality of it, I cannot and will not interrupt an operation undertaken to save a human life," Dr. Cuillian said.

Adam Drake had gone. From the airlock, he opened the side-hatch. Beyond was a curving metal stair, winding upward. He leapt up the stairway, three steps at a time. The energy panels had been bright at one time, but now were feebly glimmering squares, and wan and yellowed with age. A panel in the roof gave him access to a tall chamber, lit with electric tubes, with rows and rows of plugs, energy circuits, and switches lining its shelves from floor to ceiling. He shut the trapdoor, and walked past a row of shelving.

In the next aisle were the energy circuits for the infirmary and surgery. He found the circuits for the lights, the two banks of robotic surgery instruments, the air-pump and the sterilization field. This last circuit he pulled.

He waited, listening for the drop in pitch from the dynamo. But he heard no change.

Opening the panel, he found the cables within dark and cold. The power going to the surgery was not going through this nexus. Someone had re-routed it.

Solomon Rourke stepped around the corner. He spoke into his wristwatch, "He's here, Sister Aetia, as you thought." In his other hand he held his musket, which he pointed casually at Adam Drake.

Adam Drake said, "You heard the Rector recording his edict on the command channel."

Solomon Rourke nodded. "We knew you would come up to stop us. Sister Aetia said you were predictably indirect, and would come here, not to the surgery."

"And will you defy his command?"

"Perhaps I am disobedient," said Rourke grimly. "But *you* are a murderer. Or would have been, had I not stopped you. Dr. Voltaire is on that table up there. What did you think would happen to him when you shut down the knives, probes, fields, and lights in the middle of an operation? Dr. Voltaire was your friend, once, Mr. Drake. What sort of monster are you?"

"One with a conscience." He stepped back half a step. "I would have shut off no more than the sterilization field."

"Stand still. The Rector's order exiles you from the encampment. As deacon, I hereby arrest you. You are now under penalty."

Adam Drake glanced behind him, to where the circuits for the communication laser stood. It was the only other nexus able to carry the powerload the infirmary drew.

Solomon Rourke raised his musket to his shoulder. "Stop. I know your thought."

"You've shut down the communication laser to use the circuit. Nothing we've done has been beamed to the ship," said Drake.

"The *St. Anselm* has been empty for years. Nothing is up there," said Rourke.

"Nothing except the gigawatt radio-laser aimed at Sol."

"Sister Aetia and I are disagreed on the point. I wish to inform Mother Earth in our next broadcast that we have found the Fountain of Youth, the tree of life. It is an ill thing not to share this gift with mankind."

"But you've disabled the communication laser . . ."

At that moment, Sister Aetia and Dr. Cuillian entered the chamber, the sister's gray robes billowing with her strides, the doctor's careful step measured by the tapping of his cane. Drake was surprised to see the doctor here. He must have quickly come up from the shipmoot, perhaps in response to a signal from Aetia. It implied a degree of co-operation, of conspiracy, that Drake had not suspected.

"Tell him nothing," said Sister Aetia. "Arrest him."

"By what authority?" asked Drake.

"The Rector's edict exiles you."

"And forbids the operation which, I assume, Dr. Van Wenk is performing on Dr. Voltaire right now."

Sister Aetia smiled a sickly grin. "The edict was not recorded."

"Then by what authority can you arrest me?" And he took a step backward.

Solomon Rourke said, "Stop. If you move toward the communication panel, I will shoot you."

Sister Aetia said, "Don't be a fool. The Rector is old and weak. *We* shall be young and vital! We shall master this world. Join us. I need your skill to speak to the natives. To buy slaves, to organize hunts."

"Indeed. But for what do I need *you*?" He inched backward, not daring to look at the other panel, near to his shoulder, which was his true goal.

Aetia cackled. "You are a young man again, with the lusts and passions of youth! Have you thought of what you shall do for your satisfaction?

The natives will not comfort you, I assure you!" she giggled. "You may think me foul and wrinkled now, but do you recall how I was aboard ship? I will be *beautiful* again, young, alive, and free! Nimue is married to the Rector. Katarina is insane. There will be only *me*. Are you revolted? I will be able to wait. A thousand years, a million. I will have time enough to play coy. Mountains will tumble and stars grow cold. My vows? I have been celibate this life; my life begins anew with my second youth, and no vows to bind me!"

"You will excuse me if I decline. You disgust me. I will wait for the first shipload of Earthwomen."

"They will not come! I will disable the laser! This world is meant for me alone!"

"Excellent," said Adam Drake. "That will give me another few centuries in which to work." And he reached out, not toward the communication panel, but to a panel immediately to his left, and pulled the circuit open. He was standing next to the panel for the circuitry chamber.

He pulled. The lights went out.

Solomon Rourke's instinct, as a musketman, was not to shoot without a clear shot. Adam Drake jumped as he opened the circuit; Solomon Rourke held his fire.

"Keep clear of the surgical power, Mr. Drake! If you kill Voltaire, I will kill you."

Sister Aetia said, "Fool! He can kill us all now. The ambiot altered the chemical structure of his eyes. He can see partway into the infra-red! Let's escape while we may! He can see us! We are blind! We are helpless in the dark!"

"Be quiet, Aetia," said Dr. Cuillian. "I am no more helpless than before. There. He is near the power switches, opening them up. Mr. Rourke, can you feel my hand? Shoot where I direct. Wait! He is moving. There. Now. Fire."

The flash from the gunpowder lit up the room. For a frozen instant, Adam Drake saw Solomon Rourke's grim, weatherbeaten face bent over his weapon, Dr. Cuillian with wild white hair and white beard, leaning beside him and guiding his hand, and Sister Aetia crouched in the corner like a witch, her cowl and habit a crooked bundle of shadows.

Then it was black, and Adam Drake was thrown back, breathless and thoughtless, impaled with pain, as the ill-aimed hot bullet struck through the flesh and bones of his shoulder. As if thrown by a giant, Adam Drake's body was flung into the cabinets. An aisle of the machinery toppled.

A warm floating numbness seized Adam Drake's brain. The pain was still real, but remote. The gloom of the room seemed to clear; he saw shadowy forms around him, the falling machinery, Rourke drawing his sabre, Cuillian clutching his ears, bewildered by noise. It was as if something in his nervous system were helping his brain interpret the random few photons striking his eyes into shadowy pictures.

With one hand he pulled himself to the trapdoor. A spasm of strength,

like an adrenal rush, seized his arm when he tried to throw the lever. The hatch opened. He fell and slid down the stair, leaving a long bloody trail.

At the bottom, a second adrenal rush allowed him to dog shut the hatch. He was in the airlock. The room beyond was empty; the Rector had gone. Painfully, slowly, Adam Drake tilted his head. He saw where Solomon Rourke, when he had first entered the shipmoot, burdened by the Ophiuchan, had jammed the safety interlock with a stick, allowing him to open both doors at once.

Adam Drake fainted once and then again as he crawled across the airlock deck, a matter of a few feet. The floor seemed to be gyrating and wobbling as black lights swarmed and danced in his vision, swelling and receding. Then his sense of balance left him; he felt as if he were falling. His vision focused. The pictures seemed tiny and colorless, but clear, as if some emergency circuit in his optic nerve were showing him his environment as best it could.

He kicked away the stick. The safety interlock engaged. With a trembling hand, he reached up and pulled the exit bar. The machinery whistled and throbbed. The outer lock door cycled open. Adam Drake's ears popped as the pressure rose. A shaft of pitiless red 36 Ophiuchus light fell in. He wedged the stick into the outer door's hinge.

The inner door now could not be opened. Adam Drake gratefully fainted.

When he awoke, the bleeding had stopped. A group of muscles in his chest had constricted oddly, and pinched the bleeding veins closed. Scar tissue had already begun to form. His shoulder was numb and stiff, as if it had been anesthetized, and the muscles of his upper back were as unmoving as a cast would be. He looked at his wristwatch, and dialed up the basic display. The little crystal screen displayed the time. Only a few moments had passed.

Adam Drake's ears detected a faint hissing whine; the noise of a magnetic disintegration torch, probably the one from the machine-shop, eating away at the side-hatch. The hatch was slightly warm to the touch.

He was in no mood to talk. With his one good hand, he gathered up all the rebreather masks and threw them out of the hatch. The bundle slid down slope a little way, masks rolling and flopping, goggles glinting. He opened the valves on all the airtanks. The rack of airtanks hissed like a chorus of snakes.

He took the daycloaks with him as he ran out the air lock, tossing them here and there along the slope, or throwing them high into the wind, where they fluttered and sailed for a moment. Whenever he came near a motion-detector, he threw a cloak over the device, hoping that the wind-rippled fabric, by flapping, would keep the detector ringing continually. If they were monitoring his movements from the watch-room, they would receive a confused array of signals.

Adam Drake ran downslope, exhilarated at the youthful power and grace of his limbs. His skin grew darker as his eyes adjusted; he saw a

thousand variations of shadow and texture, subtle shades of color unknown to him before. He laughed.

The pass-key signal on his wristwatch opened the airlock to the hangars. He was grateful that they had not yet thought to reprogram the lock.

Inside, the vast metal chamber held normal earthly light, colors, temperature, and pressure. Robotic arms from the ceiling had lifted one of the two aircraft onto the launch deck. Another arm had entered the refueling socket.

The Rector rolled forward on his wheelchair from behind the control desk. "Welcome, Adam. I had come here to see if the communication lasers on either the *Dove* or the *Raven* could reach the *St. Anselm*. I saw that if Sister Aetia and the others were willing to intercept the recording of my edicts, that she would stop at nothing. I thought there might be violence. I hoped you would escape, and expected you would come to obtain an aircraft."

"And did the communications lasers reach?"

"Yes. By hooking the energy-cells from both aircraft in series, I had enough power to send a signal to the *St. Anselm*. I recorded the edict, and also the title of the ownership of the *Raven*. That is the craft you prefer, I believe? It is now yours."

Adam Drake's face lit up. "How can I thank you?"

"It is enough for me to know that I have prevented you from becoming a thief, by giving you what you otherwise would have stolen. Tell me what occurred in the dome."

"Cuillian, Aetia, and Rourke are in rebellion. I went to the circuit room and tried to disconnect the power to the sterilization generator in the lab. Rourke saw me, thought I was trying to shut down all the power, to kill Voltaire."

Adam Drake held out a flattened lump of lead, stained brown.

"What is that?" The Rector asked.

"Rourke shot me. The ambiot in my body ejected the bullet from the wound."

"Rourke would not have . . ."

"He thought I was trying to kill Voltaire."

"Were you?"

"Shutting down the sterilization field would have stopped the operation. Voltaire would have lived out his normal span, perhaps a year or two. Then he would have died. I would have caused that, I suppose, by stopping him from becoming immortal. But preventing someone from becoming immortal doesn't make me a murderer."

"As I believe in heaven's grace, I hope that what you say is so. Otherwise, I am as much a murderer as you." The Rector's face was grim. "Take the *Raven* and go. Emilio Voltaire should join you in exile in about a day. I will order the robot surgeon instruments reprogrammed or destroyed. No one will be tempted when no one is capable of performing the delicate implantation operation."

"The dome is in rebellion. They will not obey."

"The computer still obeys my voice. I have ordered all the doors to lock, and used my override. No door in the encampment opens but at my command, except the lock of the hangar I allowed to pass you in, in hopes that you would come. Sister Aetia and Solomon Rourke are only two out of fourteen; the rest will not break to open rebellion. And even those two will not defy me to my face. I will post a guard in the surgery if need be. My edict stands."

"Exile is too merciful. Who takes command after you have passed away?"

"Father Rodriguez . . . had been . . ."

"Next?"

"Dr. Cuillian . . ." the Rector frowned.

"And how long do you think you will live, Rector? What edicts will Cuillian repeal once he takes command? Aetia and Rourke will accept the brief exile during the short remainder of your life. Then they win."

"I will destroy the infirmary if need be."

"Even with the infirmary destroyed, it will not be enough. The natives can do it. They did it to *me*. With the correctly trained plastoderms inserted in the correct sequence, the natives don't need our fancy programmable microtools to perform their operation . . ." Adam Drake shuddered.

"I know. We removed several of those worms from you before we knew what they were. The natives have sufficient skill to tempt us. That is why I am sending you among them. You are our voice to the Ophiuchans. You must tell them never, not ever again, to suffer an ambiot to be implanted in a man."

"That I will gladly do." said Adam Drake. But he paused, and stood staring down at the Rector.

The Rector smiled. "Do not say it, Adam."

"Unless you have an ambiot implanted in you, they will win as soon as you pass away . . ." Adam began.

"Just me?" The Rector smiled again. "What of my wife, Nimue? If we were both young again, we would want children and grandchildren. A century hence, how shall we explain to our old and withered great-grandchildren that while *we* are immortal, they shall not be granted immortality as well, even though they could be? No, Adam. The moment I have an ambiot implanted in me, they will win."

Adam Drake turned and stared out the window, up at the dome. "Deacon Rourke would not have committed murder for money, or for glory, or for a woman, or for any of the other things men are tempted by. But *this* is a temptation which infinitely rewards those who yield to it, and punishes with old age and death those who resist!"

"Of the two trees in Eden, knowledge and life, Eve was tempted by one. We now are tempted by the other. What is the proper response to temptation? Resist it. What if that temptation is greater in magnitude

than any other ever has been? The answer is the same. Magnitude alters nothing. Resist it!"

"And you are not tempted?"

"Nor would you be, Adam, if you had not lost your faith. Our Lord promises us that we shall be risen up, and clothed in bodies of incorruptible light." He smiled. "Or, perhaps you can at least have faith in mankind. Our science may soon discover how to reproduce what the trained ambiots do, or reproduce the effect without killing the Ophiuchan host. You do not know how long your struggle will last. Have faith while it does."

"And what am I to do? Suppose I convince the natives to stop their slave trade. They will not be able to resist the energy weapons the immortals of the dome will bring to bear. And the Earthmen will eventually come. The Ophiuchans don't have an industrial civilization and military technology equal to our own. And I shall be alone. By that time, all others who believe it is wrong to kill the Ophiuchans will be dead."

"You are the translator. The others do not realize how much they depend on you to talk to the Ophiuchans. You will have your power of speaking."

"What can one man do, armed only with the power of speaking?" asked Adam Drake bitterly.

"I do not know how to comfort men who do not believe what I believe. I am a Christian. I believe that one man can work the salvation of a planet; it has happened before."

"I will not comfort myself with false beliefs," said Adam Drake. "But I will do what I must, whether I am comforted or not."

"God go with you, Adam."

"Good-bye, Rector, I expect that I will not see you again."

"Not in this life, Adam."

And Adam Drake turned and strode toward the *Raven*, his black garments swaying, his face grim, his step determined. From the lockers, he took his flight-suit and helmet and language box. At his signal, a robotic arm dipped down from the ceiling and lifted him into the cockpit.

Quickly, calmly, efficiently, he made the preflight check. He sealed and pressurized the craft. The engine whined to speed.

Magnetic impulses from the launch-deck levitated his craft out through the bay-doors and into the air. Rotary vanes slid out from his wings and lifted him up and away.

Gaining altitude, he dropped his nose, folded his vanes, and slid down through the air. Nucleonic rockets, ejecting steam at supersonic speed, propelled him forward till his velocity was great enough to open his turbines and ignite the ram-jet. He turned to circle the great mountain.

Through the slanted canopy window, and on the instrument screens, he could see the little gold bubble of the dome, the only habitation fit for humans within twenty-three light-years, except for the deserted hulk of the *St. Anselm*.

He circled the dome, once, twice, hoping for the last glimpse of a human

being. There was a silhouette of someone standing on the observation deck, looking up, but Adam Drake could not see who it was. He dipped his wings in a last salute.

Then he turned the *Raven* aside, and fled through the air. Tall upright streamers of cloud rose to either side of him, like titanic jail bars drawn across the dark purple sky. Below, the mountain crags shimmered with gold crystalline grasses.

He shut the intake to kill the ram-jet, fired his braking rockets, opened his vanes. Rotating the vanes till they faced forward, he broke his speed. Then, rotating them back to true, he made a circle down through the air.

Below, he saw a wide clear space. There was a great flat outcropping of the subterranean colony-creature he had dubbed the atlas. To either side of the blue-reddish outcrop of the atlas, the forest-array slowly stalked by, the organisms taking one slow languid step after another, crystalline sparks glinting, sheaths open like sails, tall horns and branches pointing at the violet-red sun. The atlas was like a rock in the midst of a slow-moving stream of green, gold, and dark blue.

The *Raven* settled to the outcropping, whirlwinds jetting from its wings. The vanes slowed, folded, and shut.

Adam Drake descended from the aircraft, holding his box. He wore his daycloak, certain that Homer would not recognize him without the odor of his cloak. Near the edge of the outcropping grew tall organisms twice the height of the forest that the expedition had never found growing in any other valley: towering violet-black bundles of intertwined fibers and streamers, reaching up toward clusters of floating black balls. Here and there in the towers, white-hot points of fire burned, providing the heat to lift the parachute-leaves.

Upwind of the nearest purple tower of intertwined strands stood a native. In two prongs, extended wide and angled away from its trunk, it held flowers which burned with bright chemical fire. The flames writhed in its claws and did not hurt it. Another set of prongs angled forward out from its wing-vanes, like a praying mantis, holding a braid or twisted rope. Its wing-vanes were half-folded around it, like the trailing skirts and bustle of a woman's ball gown, or the spiral petals of a rose.

On its crown, every other frond was upright, and every other frond was tilted out at the same angle, like insect antennae. The hearing diaphragms, which ran radially around the low crown, were swollen shut into folded knots. Evidently the noise of the landing aircraft had alarmed it.

Groups of tiny fluttering insects that Adam Drake called "pteroptics" swarmed in the air near the clawsful of flame. He knew that they were remote eyes.

Several of the native's legs were crooked, others were straight. The knee-claws of the crooked legs held bits of braided fiber and clusters of white crystal shells. With a slow, inhumanly graceful motion, the native opened three of its legs and lifted them into the air. When the legs straightened, the knee-claws retracted, and the fibers, like wisps of fluff,

floated down. The shells clashed and tinkled as they fell, ringing like dropped pennies.

Adam Drake unfolded his box on the ground. The box consisted of a computer screen, a group of visual and magnetic recording cameras, a rack of bottled chemicals, scents and perfumes, a chemical synthesizer. He unrolled a group of hoses toward the native, and connected them to the several chemical scent analyzers, filters, and detectors. It took him about ten minutes to set up his equipment.

He assumed that this was his friend, "Homer." The bright black-and-yellow patterns on the wings were the same, but he knew that the wings were actually separate symbiotic organisms, and could be exchanged among the aliens—regrown onto a separate host.

The analyzer tubes hissed. The machine, within a few minutes, had performed a dozen chemical tests on the perfumes radiating from the native, both separately and in combination. There was an 80 percent match-up between this native's odor-elements and those of the native Drake had dubbed "Homer."

While the box's centrifuges, filters and tubes prepared the odors of Drake's message, he counted the natives standing in the forest array nearby. Many held iron false claws in their prongs. Some had coated their outer skins with glue or hard lacquer, or strings or webs of shell, but none had armor. Instead, they had wadded scented leaves in their crowns to protect themselves from poison wafts of gas. There was no evidence of bows or throwing machines, but some smaller wingless decapods held javelins tipped with sharpened shells or flattened iron tips. Adam Drake believed that the wingless ones were a semi-intelligent related species, as if mankind had trained platoons of apes for combat.

Drake turned his attention back to Homer. The meaning of some elements of the posture were known to him; others not. The gesture of holding every other scent frond upright or down indicated both a desire to talk (the raised scent fronds were held up away from the odor glands during speech, to prevent them from being contaminated with one's own scent) and to listen (the lower fronds were spread on the wind to catch passing odors).

The gesture of holding flames out from the body Adam Drake did not know. He supposed that it was purely functional. The flames attracted the pteroptics into widely spaced globes, giving Homer greater parallax as it looked through its flying eyes. Perhaps Homer had been attempting to judge the distance of the approaching aircraft.

The leg-gesture was obscure to him. The desire for movement? The casting aside of old impediments, symbolized by dropped shells and fluff?

Homer flicked open its flaming claws. Sparks of fire shot in each direction, trailing little lines of smoke. The pteroptics, following the sparks, fled out over the outcropping, swarming near and far.

Homer dipped its fronds. They fanned out before and behind its head like insect wings. This was a gesture of curiosity, a question.

The analyzer began to identify odors. The Ophiuchan language was

more related to Oriental picture-writing than to any other human language. Grammar was dependent, not on sequence of odors, but on their texture and position in space: near or far, overhead, impregnated into the ground, or depending on wind speed and variability. Adam Drake had classified the aliens according to their differing grammars, as Linear, Radial, Spiral, Lateral, Layered, and so on. Drake had no notion if these groups represented differing tribes, religions, races, or states of mind. The Linear group had developed a method of imprinting scents into wound rope, and this was the easiest grammar for Drake to follow.

In the first message-group, the odors were of a daycloak, a smell of metal and rubber, and of a conversation rope tinged with odors for metal and leather. These scents all were permeated with the same under-scent, indicating that they were a group. This cartouche was Adam Drake's name among the aliens: "The man whose machine speaks." (The tinge of metal and leather was one of Homer's jokes. Adam Drake did not have a conversation-rope when they first met, and had held up his leather belt by the buckle, in imitation of their gesture.)

The second odor was the navigation scent the Linears used to trace across the countryside, like milestones, so that the natives could orient themselves despite wind-changes, or precipitation of chemicals from clouds in the atmosphere.

The third was a cartouche of the atlas-creature combined with the smell of a daycloak. Their word for Mother-Earth, the man-world.

To disperse one's flying eyes afar was a gesture of hunting and seeking. The machine translated the odor-message as "How far is Adam Drake from Earth? What is his position relative to other men?"

The Ophiuchan language and philosophy had no definite way to refer to the past. To an Ophiuchan, if another of its kind were far away, perhaps on a distant mountain-peak, it could be scented only dimly. Likewise, if one came upon the footprints where another Ophiuchan had lingered days ago, they smelled of the same dim scent. Thus, to Ophiuchans, to be far off either in time or space was the same, and was represented by the same word in their language. To make matters worse, to be standing nearby in a high wind, or covered in water, meant the same thing, and both were described by the same scent-phrase. And because warriors daubed their scent-glands with water, and came to do their violent vandalism on windy days, to be violently opposed to something was to be far away from it in time and space.

Thus, Adam Drake's responding message was arranged in four lines of increasingly strong scent, to show the motion from past to present.

The first line contained Homer's personal odor, as well as Drake's machine could mimic it. The odor was generated from combinations of stored chemicals: Rope, Adam Drake's name, water, atlas, and daycloak. "Homer speaks to Adam Drake, asking him to be silent to his world, the world of men." The next group in the first line was permeated with Homer's scent to show, as if by quotation marks, what it was Homer wished Drake to hide from Earth. Drake's machine emitted the gloriously

sweet aroma of the ambiot, the odor of the most long-lived native tree, and the generalized odor of the daycloak. "Homer asks Drake never to tell Earth that the ambiots bring eternal life to men."

The second line was stronger and more recent, containing elements of rope, Adam Drake's name, the daycloak, and the odor of the hard titanium plates and solar cells with which the encampment dome of the mission was paneled. There was also an odor of tracking-scent, which was the Linear language circumlocution to refer to cause and effect, one thing leading to another. "Therefore Adam Drake and the Men of the Dome speak."

The third line, stronger, indicated still more recent events. "Therefore Rector Alexandros and other men walk on the same path Adam Drake walks, and say to themselves what Adam Drake says to himself, that it is evil and unhealthy, not in the way of nature, to violently touch the Pale Linear People. Far away from them and utterly opposed, Deacon Rourke and other men are silent to what Adam Drake says, and Adam Drake is silent to what they say; and is absent where they walk, and walks where they are absent. Deacon Rourke says to himself that it is good and healthy to violently touch, to chloroform, and to spill the blood of the Pale Linear People on the grass, that it is the way of nature."

The final line was strong in scent, and indicated an immediacy, that what would come, came here and now.

"Deacon Rourke and other men speak to the Man-World. The Man-World approaches and comes near. The Man-World violently touches the Pale Linear People, the Dark Linear People, and the Dark Spiral People. The Ocean People, the Intermittent Cloud People, the People Who Have No Eyes, and all the people who put their ten feet upon the atlas . . ." (This, Drake hoped, was clear enough to show he meant all Ophiuchans everywhere, not just the local tribes). "The Man-World touches the people, therefore the people smell of disease and corruption, decomposition, woodsmoke." This last, because the Linear Pales cremated only the dead of their most hideous criminals, to prevent their widow-buds from sporing, and inhaled the smoke of the corpse-fire during the ritual cursing and revilement. It was the most horrid and dishonorable death that Drake's command of the language could encompass.

Another alien came forward from the forest-array, tall body tilted forward, fronds trembling, legs flung high and forward as it stalked, and its foothooks tapped the atlas shells with tiny, precise clicks.

It came very close to Adam Drake, and stood with two legs angled over the machine, unfurling three of its wings. It had tails of fiber knotted on the joints of its upper middle prongs, bundles of scented grass woven into its leg-hooks. It had not one but three of the iron false-claws held overhead in its prongs, one of which was tied with perfumed black ribbons. Adam Drake recognized the fiber-tails and bundles as deodorizing agents that indicated that this native was a warrior, perhaps of high reputation.

Up close, the warrior was taller and frailer than a man, surrounded

by mothwing-soft sheaths of tissue. The texture of its skin was stiff, made of many extremely thin translucent layers of hard fabric, which gave its outer surface a lambent shine and soft depth. Tiny irregularities in the skin-surface gave it a strange, grainy texture. The faint scent of ammonia hovered near the warrior.

Many of the warrior's pteroptics landed on Adam Drake's skin or buzzed near his head, shoulders or waist. The alien's listening diaphragms unfolded and focused on Adam Drake. Adam could only wonder what, on wavelengths too deep for human ears to hear, a human male sounded like to an Ophiuchan. He had the strange feeling that it was listening to his heartbeat.

With a fluttering sweep, a group of pteroptics lifted from Drake and swirled up around the warrior's tall crown, dancing in and out of its gently waving fronds like a dozen fireflies or floating gems.

Adam Drake sat still, not daring yet to move. He knew that native warriors rarely confronted each other directly, and almost never killed each other. Instead they would commit acts of vandalism and destruction, burning crops and spore-fields, interrupting sexual ritual, killing children, smashing eggs, opening larval pods. Even the iron claws were not truly weapons, but rather devices to hide the scent of the vandal in a communal perfume, so that when the victims of a raid came upon poisoned eels or uprooted mating-racks or dismembered children, there would be no one individual's smell in the hand prints left on the wreckage.

Drake sat in front of his machine, wondering if the alien warrior would consider him an adult, and so immune from attack.

The machine detected odors: the general scent of daycloaks, the metallic scent of the dome, the smell of decomposition, tracking scent, the generalized odor of the Linear Pale People, and the perfume of the most long-lived tree. The computer could not analyze the grammar, but Adam Drake could guess the meaning, "If the men of the dome decompose, therefore the Pale Linear People will prosper." A complex odor set the box could not analyze. Perhaps a statement of philosophy or valuation, or emotional reference? Next, the odor for the daycloak, tracking scent, the daycloak again. Again, the warrior was not as clever with words as Homer, not as clear, but Adam Drake guessed the meaning, "Men have brought this upon themselves."

Next, the odor of chemical excitement native leaves and sheaths made when exposed to 36 Ophiuchus-light. The Ophiuchans had no abstract word for good, but the scent-image of a sunlit forest was their circumlocution for what was good, healthy, and in accord with the way of nature. "And it is well."

The warrior emitted two more scents; one was the odor that an Ophiuchan's skin took on in a state of high excitement, zeal, and anger. The other, Adam Drake needed no machine to translate; it was the stench of human blood.

Adam Drake picked up one of the hoses, and, pinching the nozzle,

sprayed the odor of gunpowder, and of the invulnerable metals of the expedition dome, into the air, until the smell of the warrior's last message was entirely smothered. He pointed a waft from the hose at the warrior, for emphasis.

The warrior emitted a surprise-signal, and scuttled backward. Adam Drake, puzzled, rolled an analyzer-head back and forth over the shells where the warrior had been standing. The box picked up some faint traces of the scent-glyphs the warrior had been issuing to itself. The computer identified it as an emotion for which there was no word in the human language, the native feeling of superiority and glee which came from being odorless and imperceivable; then, startlement at being discovered.

Adam Drake blinked. Looking up, he saw Homer, standing, regally draped in soft furled wings, bright points of insectoid fliers dancing in its crown, wisps of smoke still rolling from two of its upright prongs. Seeing his gaze on it (or, more likely, smelling the change in his profile as his mouth and nose pointed toward it), Homer raised two legs and rubbed them together, producing a dull rubbery sound like human laughter. Homer, of course, had known that humans used eyesight primarily, and had expected Adam Drake to know where the odorless warrior, thinking itself indetectable, was hiding.

The native emotion for discovering an ironic similarity between two unlike things was their closest equivalent to humor, and was shown by bobbing one's fronds quickly down and up, as if hunting for more scent. Adam Drake turned toward Homer, and, putting his wrists to the sides of his head, curled and uncurled his fingers rapidly.

Homer raised two more legs and rubbed them together, in imitation of a noise it could not itself hear, to represent an emotion it could not experience. Adam Drake flicked his fingers near his head, producing a motion in the air that his nose could not possibly detect, to represent an emotion alien to him.

Homer lowered its legs, and Adam Drake, smiling, lowered his hands.

Homer twisted one leg up oddly and ran its toe claws along various glands and orifices running down its trunk. Then, reaching its leg forward, it tapped each slim bony toe-hook down in front of the machine's analyzer hoses. It was a very deliberate method of placing the scent-message. Adam Drake wondered if it was meant to show emphatic precision.

The first line of odors were of tracking scent, a leather belt, a cartouche which mingled the leather belt with the odors for decomposition, the glorious perfume of the ambiot, the daycloak, the atlas-creature. The leather belt was Homer's shorthand version of Adam Drake's name, "The man who speaks." The computer translated the message, "Adam Drake has told us of the death mankind and the ambiot will bring to all the lands of the world."

Several odors in combination came next, including the scent of the fulcrum tree. The fulcrum tree was a native organism which tilted its

whole length toward 36 Ophiuchus at the dawn, and, with a system of proto-muscles and balancing valves, rotated toward the west each day. "The principle of the balance of nature requires that Adam Drake speak well, speak healthy words in the way of nature, to counterbalance the ill words he has spoken, the unnatural, sickening message."

Next emerged the odors for night time, high winds, iron, smoke, the odor of Ophiuchan zeal and wrath, the smell of human blood.

"The raiding party has gathered to spill the blood of men." Tracking scent, sunlit leaves, larvae, "So that their children will prosper in health." Conversation rope odor permeating a group of odors; leather belt, ropes, decomposition, the balance tree, iron, human blood, a complex odor the computer could not identify, eggs, iron, smashed eggs, tracking scent, leather belt, iron, human blood. "The raiding party says to itself that Adam Drake speaks death. The principle of balance in nature requires that he die by violence. Violence allows eggs to be destroyed; Adam Drake is the egg of our troubles; therefore he may be destroyed, his blood spilled on the ground."

The computer detected, very faintly, a perfume code stroked onto the nozzles of the analyzer hose itself. "Homer seeks to uproot and becalm the hatred and wrath of the raiding party, and asks, if Adam Drake is a man, how far is he from the Man-World, the egg and the fountainhead of the death of all the Pale Linear People? If Adam Drake is close to other men, he will spill his blood when their blood is spilt. If he is far from the other men, he must tell us, and he must tell us the secrets of mankind, gunpowder, hard metals, machines which go up into the air, machines which spill blood into the grass. Homer asks where Adam Drake will stand."

Adam Drake understood that Homer was not wiping the scent from his toe-hooks directly into the analyzer as a gesture of emphasis. It was a whisper, meant to hide the message from the raiding party.

The computer registered another message. "Adam Drake and Homer now have grown so their limbs entwine each other. If Adam Drake is uprooted, Homer shall be uprooted as well. The men must die in order that our children will prosper in health. If Adam Drake stands with the men, Homer must stand with the men also, for their limbs entwine each other. But, in order for the children to prosper in health, all men must die. Adam Drake must die, and Homer must die, if they are near the men. Where does he stand, Adam Drake?"

Adam Drake screwed the nozzle on one hose to a pinpoint, and valved the condenser to a trickle of air. On that hose he sprayed a faint message at Homer's foot. Homer raised the foot high up to its crowns and writhed its fronds among its toe-hooks. The message was, "Deacon Rourke and some men are bloody and unhealthy and deserve to die. Rector Alexandros and some men are clean and healthy and shall live. If the hard metal of the dome is cracked like an egg, all the men shall die. If men who are clean and healthy and should live are killed by the raiding party,

then the raiding party stinks like Deacon Rourke, bloody, unhealthy, and deserving death."

Homer for a long time made no response, but stood swaying slightly in the breeze, prongs high, fronds twitching, clusters of eyespots floating here and there in the air.

The odor-codes of Homer's response seeped into the machine. "There is one who has a deadly disease. The people say to the one, put yourself away from us, that your disease not taint our scents, not poison us. The one goes on a windy day, annotated with water and ammonia, and puts the eggs from its body, which share its disease, into the pond of another. The one stirs the water with circles of its foot, and the eggs become as one, and none can put the well eggs apart from the diseased. The other, whose name is written among the fumes of the pool, cannot put the eggs which are its children apart from the diseased eggs of the one. When the raiding party comes to poison the pool with ink, the other holds up rope, and says, here are the eggs that are my children, that are not diseased, that you come to poison with ink in their pool. The raiding party holds up rope and says, if the eggs of the one who has a deadly disease open, diseased eels will spawn, diseased amphibians will come from the eels, diseased adults will come from the amphibians, their wings will touch the wings of the people, and all the people will die, and stink of corruption. Therefore, the other tears off its wings, and reaches into the pool with an iron fork to break the eggs from its body, its children. But the iron does not bear the scent of the other. Iron smells only of iron. All of the people do not die of disease and smell of corruption. The sunlight shines on the forest; all is well; the way of nature is done."

Homer reached up with a thin, crooked leg and stabbed one of its own wings with a toe-claw. The beautiful, delicate fabric shimmered and tore. Homer's whole trunk shivered and shook as the leg slowly straightened. The wing-sheath fluttered in spasms, and shed colored dust. With a kick, Homer flung the torn wing high up in the air. The wing hung in the wind, a small triangle of fabric, rocking back and forth in the air.

The raiding party in the forest ejected bright swarms of pteroptics. The flying eyespots swirled around Homer, glittering brightly, swarming in hundreds, crawling along Homer's trunk, or circling in columns above.

Adam Drake sat in front of his machine, hands on his face, staring. The meaning of what he saw was beyond him; too alien, too strange. But the main point of Homer's message was clear. The raiding party would not allow the guilty men in the dome to shield themselves behind the innocent. Too much was at stake. And if Adam Drake attempted to side with any of the men, guilty or innocent, he would be killed, and perhaps Homer as well. And the only sign he could make to show that he was not siding with the men would be to teach the natives how to build human weapons and machines.

But, in conscience, he would not contribute to any attempt on the dome while there were any innocent men still left alive in it. In any case, an attack on the dome was impossible without long range artillery, energy

weapons, and armor, or, at the very least, hand-weapons and electronic counter-measures to jam the robot guns. . . .

Drake took his hands from his face. He had been thinking like a mortal man. But strong evidence was that he was *not* mortal. By the time the Ophiuchans could develop the military and industrial techniques necessary to mount such an assault, no one would be left alive in the dome except those who had murdered a native, or benefitted by such a murder. Adam Drake would still be here.

He suddenly understood the meaning of the self-mutilating gesture of stripping away a wing. Homer's message implied that wings were the main carriers of disease during epidemics. Drake knew that the wings carried odors signifying rank, status, honor, fecundity, and all the virtues the natives held dear. But, during a plague, the natives were willing to sacrifice honor to save their lives, their community, their children, and those things for which they lived and died. . . .

Adam Drake stood up and stripped off his daycloak, his symbol of humanity, and threw it into the air. The daycloak flapped and fell past where the torn wing still floated weightlessly on the wind. Adam Drake typed into his machine.

"Adam Drake does not stand with the men or near them. Adam Drake, of all men, is the farthest away from Earth. Here I stand.

"Attend me; for I shall now teach you all which mankind has learned about the art of making machinery, and the art of thinking about the world with doubt, so as to learn the truth of the world, on which truths the art of making is rooted.

"The first root of all learning is that a thing is what it is, and that what is said about a thing, cannot be at once both true and false. . ." ●



CURSE OF THE DOPPELGÄNGER'S WIFE

The life he shares with her
is no more than a dream,
no more than a fatal game,
his modus vivendi operandi
while he steals a different life

and claims a different name.
His origins and his history
and why he should so yearn
to seize upon another's world,
to wear another's hat and cloak,

are topics he will never broach.
So who but her, who loves him so,
would share his murderous scheme
as confederate and drama coach?
Yet when his plans are realized

he'll live upon some other street,
he'll take another's wife to bed
and carve another's Sunday meat.
Then what of her and what of him?
Will she play the role of mistress?

Wife-to-be? Or just some woman
from the past who knows his real
identity, could expose him for his
treachery, a corpus flagrante delicti
best disposed of in the open sea?

—Bruce Boston

Nisi Shawl

THE RAINSES'

Nisi Shawl is a 1992 graduate of Clarion West who lives in Ann Arbor, MI. Over the past twenty years she has been a book-dealer, a singer, a fund-raiser, a diviner, and a paet. Ms. Shawl has published articles an African religiaus traditions in the New World. Her SF appearances include an illustration for Bruce Sterling's *Crystal Express* and a short-short in *Semiotext(e) #14*. "The Rainses'" is her first story for *Asimov's*.

Illustratian by Steve Cavalla





A bell hung below the back porch. It was as big as Anniette. She wanted to ring it, to shove the dirty, cobwebby metal hard enough to swing it; back and forth, back and forth. It looked like it would make a lovely clang. But it was only for emergencies. Like a fire, or if somebody broke a leg. Gransie said. So the bell stayed still under the dark, creaky wood, over the drifted scraps of last year's fallen leaves, half in cool shadow, half in lake-reflected light.

Walking over the bell, you could go lots of ways. The porch went all around the house, though it changed in nature several times during its journey. To the left, it widened into a verandah furnished with dusty, deserted deck chairs. To the far right was a door into a long glass passage, which, as Anniette realized one rainy and intuitive afternoon, was really the porch with windows on. It led to the front hall and the archery range.

But usually she went in the doorway that was on the right, but not so very far right as that. This led to steps that she had promised never to go down, and to another choice: left or right? Right was a tiny yellow room, crowded with narrow wooden chairs, a lace-covered table and lots of cupboards, with glass behind glass doors. So most of the time she went left, into the big broad kitchen.

The kitchen sparkled blue and white. Painted cupboards gleamed, floor to ceiling. The linoleum was skating smooth. On a little platform, two tall-backed benches curled up together over a pale blue table-top. That's where Gransie was, with her breakfast.

Gransie had made her Maypo. Steam rose up from the table, from the solid, green-rimmed bowl. Even in summertime, Gransie always made her hot cereal for breakfast.

"Your hands clean?"

Anniette nodded. They had to be; she hadn't done anything yet. Just run out into the morning to make sure that it was there.

"Let's see, then."

She held her hands out for inspection, pink palms up.

"The other side. All right. You be sure and wash 'em, though, after you're through eatin. 'Specially if you're plannin on playin inside again. I don't want you messin up with none of Miz Raines' things."

Butter melted in her mouth, mixed with cream and sugar. "I want to go swim. In the lake. Can I?"

Gransie frowned. "You better wait. After an hour you can go in. I'll let you know. Stay where I can see you until then."

"Yes, Gransie." Anniette finished her cereal and washed her bowl and hands in the low kitchen sink, then headed back outside. This time she went through the "morning" room, out onto the verandah. Cement steps swept down to the lawn, cradled by fieldstone arms. Anniette walked

along the curving stones. The sun struck through distant trees, making pretty patterns on the big white house and the empty, weedy lawn. At the end of the steps, she looked around, deciding what to do. The rose arbor beckoned her. She jumped to the ground and ran obediently toward it.

The rose arbor was an arching trellis of soft grey and white wood. The roses were just beginning. Later in the summer, they smelled so sweet, and sent spent petals drifting down, covering the seats. But now they were secret, dark green and closed.

Anniette picked one. She sat down and tried to peel back the first layer with her nails.

"It won't work. What you're trying to find isn't in there, yet."

Anniette looked up. It was a tall, grey-clad woman with straight brown hair pulled back in a bun. She had a white scarf around her shoulders. She was one of Them, from next door.

"I'm not trying to find the flower," Anniette explained. "I'm trying to find what makes the flower."

"A budding botanist."

"What's that, a botanist?"

"A botanist is someone who studies plants." The lady took the other seat. She did it without brushing aside the twigs and leaves lying there. "Someone who dedicates their whole life to the study of plants."

"Unh-unh," said Anniette. "That's different than what I want."

"Really?" said the lady, sounding like grown-ups always did when they thought that she was cute. "What exactly is it that you want, then? Do you know?"

Anniette thought how to say it. "I want to know what makes things. What makes everything happen."

The lady laughed. Not in a mean way, but she laughed. "A little colored philosopher-girl! How fine. Things have truly changed. And we actually are related?"

There were layers of pink, packed tight under the green. They were thin, pressed way down from what they were going to be. She pulled one petal off, held it up to look through at the sun. The lady was gone.

She had on her swimsuit. Gransie said it was okay. As she walked, tiny wrinkles of blue and green stretched and bunched together in a way that pleased her. This was the favorite swimsuit she'd ever had, with seahorses like in Daddy's aquarium.

Dirt steps boxed with big boards led down to the lake. It was called Maple Lake. Most of the trees were on the other end. This side had reeds and lily pads, and that strange, hollow grass that squeaked when you pulled it apart.

She went out to the end of the dock and waved up at the house. Gransie waved back from the kitchen window. She was not supposed to go in past the bleach-bottle buoy. Maybe later Uncle Troy would come by and take her out to fish.

She sat down, careful of splinters in the weathered wood. She slipped her bare feet into the dark green water. It was cold. Maybe she would just sit there with her feet in for awhile. An enormous lavender dragonfly streaked past her head to land glittering on the tip of a nearby reed. The reed, bent under the insect's weight, arched and quivered in the breeze.

The sound of a car engine swooped up the driveway and shut off. A car door slammed. She looked up. Uncle Troy was taking a suitcase out of the trunk of his car. It must be some of the Rainses. She couldn't see who. She waited, swirling the water with her toes. They would be down here soon, if it was anybody nice. She wasn't supposed to get in their way.

Footsteps on the dock. "Anniette, is that really you?" Miss Margaret came up and sat down beside her.

" 'Course it is!" Anniette said. Grown-ups.

"I didn't recognize you; you've grown so big since the last time I saw you."

"Thanks," Anniette said. Trying to be polite she added, "You look like you've grown too." That wasn't quite right; it sounded like she was calling Miss Margaret fat. She didn't know what to say to make things better, so she shut up.

Miss Margaret was quiet too, for a while, then went on. "Well, I *have*. I've been at college for a whole year, now. But Mama still fussed about me staying in Chicago all alone while she and Daddy went to meet Bruce in New York. So we compromised. Do you know what that means, Anniette?" Anniette shook her head no. "It means we neither of us got what we really wanted. She didn't get to drag me to New York and dangle me in front of all her phoney-baloney friends, and I didn't get to stay in Chicago, with Roger."

"Who's Roger?"

"Oh, he's someone *very* special! He's a painter, Anniette." Miss Margaret moved her round, serious face closer to show how important this information was.

"Pictures?"

"Yes. Wonderful pictures. Oh, Anniette, maybe he'll come here, maybe you'll get to meet him! Mama didn't say he couldn't. She and Daddy and Bruce won't be up till the end of next week, at the earliest."

Good. She still had time to explore the house. She looked up at the sky. Hazy clouds melted imperceptibly into the blue. Maybe tomorrow it would rain, and she wouldn't feel so bad for staying inside.

Uncle Troy came down the stairs. His white T-shirt had little dark

spots of sweat around the collar, and big ones under his arms. "Your bags all up in the Rose Room, Miss Margaret. If there's anything else?"

"Not at the moment, Troy. I might ask you to go into town to pick some things up at the drugstore; I packed in kind of a hurry, and I'm not sure what I missed."

"If it's all right with you, then, I'll just use the boat and take Anniette out on the lake."

"Fishing? Wrong time of day for that, isn't it?"

"Well . . ."

"Tell you what, save the fishing for evening. See if Aunt Nancy's got anything for you to do. I'm sure she can find something. This place is getting to be a wreck."

"Yes, ma'am. But Anniette . . ."

"Oh. Well, Anniette, you're going swimming, aren't you?"

Anniette nodded. There was nothing more to say. She slipped into the water and dog-paddled away.

The gentle mutter of rain through eaves troughs woke her. Her room was high up, a turquoise-colored place full of bunks and cots. Lots of people used to stay there and help out around the place. But now there was only Gransie, and sometimes Uncle Troy drove over from Paw Paw.

Gransie stayed downstairs as much as she could, because of her rheumatism. So during her visits Anniette had the whole room to herself. She slept in the top bunk, opposite the window.

Scorning the knotty pine ladder, she jumped down onto the sea-grey carpet, then crossed to the window seat. The sash was already up. All she had to do was rest her forearms on the white enameled sill, press her forehead against the dark, rusty screen, and breathe.

Cool. The scent of grass, of wet clover. The exhalations of worms, writhing in the earth. And closer, sad, pungent mildew rose into the air, remembering itself from other rainy days.

Clouds hung low over the lake, almost seemed as though they would touch the trees. The rain would be here for a while, for all day probably.

She put on her clothes: red corduroys and her black-and-yellow checkered cowboy shirt. There were stars sewn over the pockets, and pearl snaps instead of buttons. A shirt to have adventures in.

She went down to the back porch and stood over the bell. The rain was louder here, falling in fine streams from the porch roof, splashing on the sidewalk. Breakfast smelled good. She washed her hands and considered how to approach the day's project: top to bottom, or bottom to top? Miss Margaret wasn't up yet, so downstairs first, she decided.

After they ate, Gransie headed to the little yellow room, so she went into the "morning" one. Bare boards stretched before her. There used to

be a big pretty rug here, with so many colors she didn't know all their names. There was still a dark spot on the floor where it used to keep off the sun.

The wall to her left was made up of glass doors with sparkley handles, so that one was not worth checking. But to her right, square panels of wood promised great things. She pressed along the trim with patient, sensitive fingers. There would be a whir, a click. Something would give way, and a new aspect of the house would be revealed, a mysterious facet of a familiar stone.

She came to the end of the wall without discovering anything. Maybe higher up . . . but she couldn't reach all the way unless she had a stool. She would have to see about that later.

The bathroom next. Black and yellow, like her shirt. The tile gleamed royally. The shiny black toilet was just a little bit scary.

"Did you find it yet?" The boy leaned against the sink's butter-yellow pedestal.

"No," she answered. "I just started. Is it in here?"

"I'm going to teach you a song."

"Okay." She had learned from past experience it was best to let Them take the lead. Some questions They just ignored.

"It's a very bad song. Promise you won't tell anybody that I taught it to you, or I'll get in trouble."

She felt a thrill of guilt as she hunkered down next to him, shoes scuffing damp echoes from the floor. "Promise."

"It goes like this:

Well, it's wine, wine, wine
that makes you feel so fine
in the corps (in the corps), in the corps (in the corps);
Well, it's wine, wine, wine
that makes you feel so fine
in the good old actor's co-o-orps!"

Anniette loved it. The boy's voice went down real low when he sang in the core, in the core. Then it swooped all around like a circus band on the last word. Very satisfying. Too bad it was bad. It would be a wonderful song to sing real loud while marching around. She learned all the verses.

In the library, she pulled all the books from the shelves one by one, then put them back. Nothing moved or turned or revolved. Nothing lurked behind the red leather couch except dust and old chew toys left from Turk's last sojourn. The Rainses didn't bring him up much anymore. She asked Gransie why as she ate her bologna sandwich in the kitchen.

"Gettin old," Gransie said. "Same as me, he just doesn't want to move around much anymore. Eat your salad; it's good for you."

Anniette pulled a pickled bean from the crystal bowl next to her plate. One was enough, she decided, as the vinegar bit its way up through her sinuses, bringing tears to her eyes. A sip of Kool-Aid, a bit of bologna and mayonnaise, and she was all better.

"Gransie, can I have a stool?"

"A stool? What you want a stool for?"

How much to explain? "I want to reach up on the walls, in the morning room. Up where that pledge sticks out."

"The pledge? You mean the *ledge*, don't you? Where they keep the keys?" She nodded. "What on earth do you want up there?"

Anniette paused. Should she tell? There was no other way to get what she wanted. "I want to find a secret passageway," she said.

Gransie snorted, pushed herself away from the table and rose ponderously. "Child, however do you manage to fill your head with such nonsense? Must be all those books you read."

Anniette lowered her eyes in shame. It was a silly idea. She was a silly girl to have had it.

Metal legs scraped lightly on the linoleum. She looked up. Gransie was pulling the white enameled step-stool from its place next to the fridge. "That room could use some dustin anyway, I guess." She reached into a drawer for an apron. "Now don't you go touchin any Miz Raines' things, Anniette. She forgave you over that leopard, but if you ever break a real expensive piece, I don't know what'll happen. Some of those things are real nice. Worth more than I make in a month." She tied the apron on Anniette, folding it up at the middle so it wasn't too long.

"Now." Anniette stood still for inspection. "Go get me a head-scarf," said Gransie.

She shot up the stairs and almost collided with Miss Margaret, talking and laughing on the telephone. "Sorry," said Anniette. Miss Margaret patted her on the head to show that it was all right and went on talking.

"Honestly, Roger," she said to the receiver. "You really should come up. What does it take to convince you? It's the most frightful old place—you'd love it. It was actually a stop on the Underground Railroad. Just a moment, dear. Anniette, is there something you wanted?"

Anniette realized she had no reason to be standing there besides her utter amazement. She shook her head and continued slowly down the hall to her room.

"Oh, that was just our maid's little granddaughter. The cutest thing. Yes, Nancy's been with us practically forever, like family really. . . ." Anniette heard Margaret's voice trailing off behind her as she walked away. But there was nothing more about the Underground Railroad. She

tried to remember all about it, what she knew from school. It was how they got colored people out of the South, away from Slavery. White people helped the colored. They had to; it must have been a lot of work to build so many tunnels and lay all that track.

She rummaged in her drawer for several minutes before she remembered what she was supposed to be looking for. A scarf. Here was one, white with yellow flowers. She carried it downstairs, deep in thought.

Gransie tied the scarf over her pigtails to keep off the dust. She grumbled that the scarf was so light and would surely show the dirt, but she didn't send Anniette back for another. She gave her two cloths and a bottle of lemon oil and showed her what to do.

The panels did look much nicer after they'd been polished. She liked the candy shop smell she spread around herself. And best of all, she had a perfect excuse to press and finger every inch of wood on the walls. Only, there was no response.

She had to leave the stool behind when she went into the yellow room. It just wouldn't fit. All that glass. It made Anniette nervous, since the leopard broke. She was very careful, really she was, but still she dropped the goblet.

Not because she got startled. Nothing was sudden like that; first there was a dry, sweet, scent, like burning flowers, and then a golden flame. The dark lady showed up slowly, like a shadow growing from the light of the candle that she held. There was nothing sudden or scary about the way she came or how she looked. But looking, Anniette forgot to hold onto the glass. It fell and rolled along the white lace tablecloth, turning over and over till it came to the other end, to where the lady stood.

The candle wavered and sank, so Anniette could see the lady's smooth, dark face. Not one of Them that she had ever seen before. Her chin was sharp and pointy, like Anniette's.

"You the maid?" Her voice was sharp and pointy, too.

"No."

"You live here, though, don't you?"

"No, I'm on a visit."

"How long?"

"All summer, if I want. Mommy says—"

The lady interrupted. "How long?"

"The end of August, when school's gonna—"

"How *long? How long? HOW—*" The lady stopped herself from shouting and looked down at the table. "Rufus gave his word. It ain't broke. It ain't. Yet." She raised her candle and looked at Anniette again. "You come on along. I can show you."

When Anniette got to that end of the table, the lady and the light were gone. But she could still see by the windows. Like the lady said, it was

all right. The only marks on the goblet were ones that were supposed to be there: flowers, carved, twisting up the curving sides.

Gransie grumbled, but Anniette was able to go over the kitchen without getting too much in the way of dinner. Miss Margaret had a tray in her room. After they ate, Anniette had to bring it down.

Then she tried the archery range. There weren't many possibilities there, so she finished quickly and went to bed. As she knelt to pray, she remembered what Gransie was saying as she left Anniette to her task that afternoon. Grown-ups always said strange things, especially as they got older and closer to being one of Them. Like Grandfather. But this stuck in her head and went along with the prayers. She had said something like in church: "Not mine, but Thine, oh Lord." Then: "But still, it's such a shame. For the sake of the child alone, it's a sin, and a cryin' shame."

A cryin shame. Not mine, but thine. Oh, lord.

It rained again next morning. Miss Margaret ate in the kitchen with Anniette and Gransie. She had cornflakes. She was up early so Uncle Troy could take her to the station to meet her friend.

So Anniette could explore upstairs.

The Red Room. It was so pretty. She always wanted to stay in here. Once, she did. It was in winter, and this room had a fireplace that still worked. She checked there first, running her hands over the cool, rough stone. No. And the closet was nothing but a closet. Disappointed, she solaced herself with the feel of the silky red curtains hanging down over the bed. They rustled, whispering of beauty. She rubbed her face in them, wished she could wear them, nothing but red silk, like a lady, a queen.

"So. This is what comes of recklessness."

It was a man. One of Them. Another new one.

The man smiled under his curly moustache. He walked away from her, toward the fireplace, then turned and looked back. He wore funny old clothes, like an ad for an ice-cream parlor. Them. "Well," he said, "at least you are a fairly good-looking pickaninny. If I do say so myself. Rachel was true unto me, and I was true unto my word."

"What's a pickaninny?"

"That you can see me at *all* is proof, I suppose." The man frowned. "You haven't seen *her*, have you? Rachel? Rachel?" His voice faded and he was gone.

How come They were around so much right now? She searched the other rooms listlessly, strangely disturbed. The one with the green wallpaper, called the Nursery. The Rose Room, where Miss Margaret's bags still waited to be unpacked. The Study. The Master Bedroom, white and

untouchable. All were void of mystery. She gave up and retreated to her room. As she put her hand upon the doorknob she suddenly thought, "It might be in here."

She went straight to the window seat. With growing sureness she searched along the woodwork, pressing, pressing . . . ah! A small section of trim moved under her touch. She looked around the room. No dim, dusty openings, no magically appearing stairways. The change was much smaller and closer. Below the seat's bluegreen cushion, a wide crack showed in the enameled wood. Anniette put the cushion on the floor and jammed her fingers in the crack. She pulled. A board flipped up. Two boards.

She was looking in someone's hidey-hole. Nice, though not as exciting as a secret passage. She reached into the darkness and pulled out a wooden box, tied around with pale blue ribbon. Underneath the box was a fan like ladies used in church. Only this fan was made of cloth. Silk, deep red silk, like the curtains in the Red Room.

She untied and opened the box. Papers. She could read print. But these were mostly letters. The writing was sharp and difficult looking, not the round, loose script she had sneaked a look at in a third-grader's book. Regretfully, she set the letters aside.

Underneath was something mostly printed, with words and numbers written in. The printing was fancy, like on the cover of Gransie's bible. She decided the short word at the top was d-e-e-d, deed.

A deed was what you did if you were a boy scout or a shining knight. Maybe it would be exciting to read, but the letters were all twiney and hooked together, and anyway, what about those numbers? What would they have to do with an adventure?

"Lot 392 . . . 16 circle East . . . by 90 circle South . . . 3 chains . . ." It didn't make sense. She scanned the page for what did. "I, Ruff-us Raines, do grant, war-rant and con-" con- something.

The word Rachel appeared several times. Like the man had said. She knew how that name looked, in print or cursive. It was her own. Anniette Rachel Hawkes.

The rain stopped around noon.

Miss Margaret was back for lunch. She ate on the verandah with her friend, Roger. He had big yellow teeth. Anniette didn't like him, but that didn't count. He was going to stay in the Red Room.

Uncle Troy and Gransie and Anniette ate in the kitchen, after Miss Margaret and her friend. While they were still having their dessert Miss Margaret stuck her head in and asked Uncle Troy if he would mind terribly getting the boat ready to go out. He said no, of course.

Anniette went with him, for lack of anything better to do. The papers

were still up in her room, in their box. Later, when Gransie wasn't so busy, she would ask her to look at them. They were probably even important. They just weren't a train station.

The boathouse was spooky in a nice way. The boat made big booming sounds as Uncle Troy lowered it to the water. The sun came out while they were still inside, making little stars of the holes in the ramshackle walls. The walls sagged so much that Uncle Troy had to duck as he rowed out under the lake side.

Miss Margaret had changed into a pretty white dress. She was smiling, and said that Anniette could come along. Anniette ran back to the boathouse for a life jacket. They smelled bad, but Gransie wouldn't let her on the lake without one, even though she could swim.

The sun was all the way out to stay. Anniette relaxed in the warmth, watched the water lilies unfolding in light that the rain had newly purified. She was happy. So she sang.

"Well, it's wine, wine, wine
that makes you feel so fine
in the corps (in the corps), in the—"

"Anniette!" Miss Margaret snapped. "What's that you're singing? Where did you learn that song?"

She had *promised*. She couldn't tell her. She felt really bad, since Miss Margaret had let her come in the boat.

"Speak up, child!"

"What's wrong?" asked Roger. "Insubordination in the ranks?"

Margaret laughed. It didn't sound like she thought anything was funny. "Not that it matters, only it seemed sort of . . . creepy."

"What seemed creepy?"

"That song she was singing. I suppose she could have learned it anywhere. It's just that I associate it so strongly with Cousin Freddy; I guess because he taught it to me when we were kids here."

"So what?" said Roger. "So he taught it to the help, too."

"Hardly," said Miss Margaret. "He died three years before Anniette was born."

"Oh."

"As I said, it's not important. I just . . . wondered."

"I taught her," said Uncle Troy suddenly from where he sat rowing. "Mr. Fred taught it to me and I taught it to her."

Everybody in the boat stared at him. Miss Margaret and her friend looked like they had forgotten he was even there. Anniette stared too, because Uncle Troy hardly ever talked unless you asked him something. And he never told lies.

Without another word from anyone, the boat returned to shore.

* * *

After supper, Anniette sat at the top of the stairs, looking down. Down. How could she have been so stupid? The train station was *underground.* That's why they called it the *Underground Railroad.* And here she'd been looking for the entrance on the second floor!

The problem was, she wasn't allowed to go into the cellar.

She always *tried* to be good.

Gransie was with some ladies from church. They were writing invitations to the ice-cream social. They wouldn't let her help, even though she colored real good. And she couldn't even show the papers to Gransie, while she was having company.

There was nothing else to do.

There was no place else to look.

She could hear Roger and Miss Margaret talking on the landing. He said, "Parrish is a fine illustrator. But that's all he is." She said, "I suppose you're right. Still, it's so pretty."

They must be talking about the girl on the swing, Anniette decided. Anniette didn't know who the girl was. Not one of Them, like a lot of pictures in the house.

"Pretty. A pointless, stupid word. A shallow compliment. I, I must confess, *I* am drawn to—the depths." There was a heavy silence, then the sound of clothes rubbing together. Kissing noises. "Tonight?"

"Roger, I—"

"You can't mean to make me wait. Maggie, I came here on trust. I came all the way from Chicago, tourist class. Maggie, my dear, you . . . - you gave me your *word.*"

Maggie was Miss Margaret. Had to be. No one else was there.

"I . . . Roger, I know, and my word means so much to me—"

More kissing noises.

"Nothing has changed, has it, darling? No, I can feel it. You are still the same true, dear, loyal, trustworthy soul. Oh, Maggie—"

"All right, Roger."

"You *will* come?"

"Yes. It's sure to be safe. Nancy never comes upstairs any more, and Anniette will be on the other side of the house, in the old servants' quarters. I'll come."

The next day was disappointingly sunny. Neither Miss Margaret nor Roger seemed to want to do much with their breakfast. They came down long after Anniette had enjoyed her Maypo, and moped around the morning room. Gransie suggested a game of croquet, but Roger thought the lawn needed cutting, and Uncle Troy wasn't going to be around till later.

After a while, Anniette saw them heading for the rose arbor. She wondered if the lady from next door would be there. She seemed to show up

there mostly, maybe because her house had burned down so long ago there were trees growing up inside the place where the basement used to be.

It was Thursday. Time to change the beds. Anniette offered to do it and save Gransie's rheumatism from the stairs. Gransie took her to the linen closet off the cellar steps.

"Gransie," she asked. "What's more important? To keep a promise or to do what you really think is right?"

"Well, chicken, you sure do ask some tough questions. Where'd you get this one?"

"I was just thinking. . . ."

"Thinkin, hunh?" Gransie picked up a stack of sheets and placed it over Anniette's arms. "Well, when it comes to questions like that, time to stop thinkin and start prayin. God will let you know. He answers every prayer."

Anniette reflected on God as she carried the piles of linen up the stairs. It took her two trips. Basically, she decided, God was one of Them, only really old and related to all the people on the earth. So *everybody* could see him and talk to him, if they tried. But you had to try *hard*, because he was so old. Was it something she was capable of? She didn't know.

The boy came in while she changed Miss Margaret's bed.

"Did you find it?"

"No, but I think I've got it figured out where to look."

"Pretty keen, huh?"

Sometimes she wondered if They heard a word she said. "Is your name Fred?" she asked.

"You might say that, yes."

"I almost got in trouble over that song myself."

"Nifty, isn't it? 'Well it's gin, gin, gin—' "

"Don't worry, I didn't tell." She had never said anything about Them to grown-ups. She didn't know exactly why. She tried to imagine explaining to Gransie. It came out like a conversation with one of Them: frustrating.

Freddy followed her to the Red Room. A note was taped to the door. It was in cursive, and she couldn't read it. She opened the door. The Red Room was a mess. Blankets and clothes were tossed all over. It looked like somebody had had a fight. One of them must have gotten a nose bleed. A red-brown stain showed where they'd slept.

She thought maybe she should still just change the sheets. But when she pulled them off, she saw how a little blood had soaked through to the mattress pad. So she went downstairs. Freddy was gone; she hadn't seen him since opening the door.

Gransie was in her room. It was really part of the kitchen, where they

used to keep some food. The bed was small and dipped down in the middle, even though Gransie wasn't sleeping there right now.

She was sleeping in her chair. Soft zuzzing sounds came from where she sat. They mixed with the static and singing voices from the radio:

"Just a closer walk with thee;
Grant it Jesus, if you please . . ."

Gransie's feet were out of their shoes, resting on a pillow. They were a funny shape, with bumps. Bunyumps, they were called. Anniette decided she could find another mattress pad herself. She closed the door quietly. Not to be sneaky, but so Gransie could stay asleep.

The part of the linen closet she needed to get into was right over the cellar stairs. Maybe she could reach it if she took the stool down and stood on it on the landing. She was careful dragging it across the floor. No marks on the linoleum, and no noise.

It was harder taking it down the three steps to the landing. And when she got up on it, the shelf where Gransie kept the mattress pads was still out of reach. She could see them, but . . .

She could also see the shadows at the bottom of the stairs.

She sat down on the landing, to rest and think. Her feet were on the next step down. Then one slipped and wound up on the one right after that.

She stood up. Six more steps to go.

But it was bad. Uncle Troy had made her cross her heart not to go there. It was dangerous, with bare electrics.

But how else was she going to find what she was looking for? The iron rails pulled her down.

Five more steps. Four more.

She stopped. A bitter smell came to her now: the captive earth. Wet, but never growing anything. A grey, unpromising weight upon the air. Maybe there was nothing. Nothing to be found. She would be breaking her word, for nothing.

She was ready to take the next step anyway. But suddenly there was a light. She had to turn around and see what from.

The lady with the candle was standing on the landing. "Don't tell me you ain't found it yet," she said. "Guess I better show you, then. Come on up."

"Oh," said Anniette. "I thought it was down here." She climbed the shallow stairs, happy she wasn't going to do anything wrong.

"I kep it," the lady said. "Hid it away." She shrugged. "Didn' know what good it was when he give it to me, but I kep it anyway. Long as Hawkeses was livin here, it appeared to be some hope." Outside, a car door slammed. Footsteps drummed on the porch. "Now I guess we'll see."

Uncle Troy opened the door and stared at her. At the *lady*, not at

Anniette. They didn't like that, so the lady wasn't there anymore. Then Uncle Troy picked Anniette up in a big hug and asked if she was okay.

He didn't even listen to her explanation about the stool. He got her a glass of Kool-Aid and made her sit down at the kitchen table to drink it. Grape.

She heard some of their talking in Gransie's room. "Oh, *no*," said Gransie's voice. "Not the whole family!"

"They were all three on the passenger list."

"Poor Margaret. Last to carry the family name. . . ."

Nobody said anything for a while. Then Uncle Troy started again. "Mom. I—I saw Rachel. She was talkin to Anniette."

"Troy, you know she's been at rest in the arms of her Savior these fifty years."

"But maybe she wanted to tell us where she put—"

"If it is meant to be, it will come to pass, through the grace of our Lord."

"But—"

"Anniette!" It was Gransie, calling her. She ran to the doorway. Gransie was putting on her shoes. When she looked up, Anniette saw that she was crying. "Fingers off the woodwork. Go find Miss Margaret. Tell her the Sheriff's comin round, there's been a bad accident."

Anniette stood on the verandah outside the morning room. The rose arbor was empty. Roger was on the beach. She saw him from the steps, throwing pebbles at the bleach-bottle buoy and missing. He was by himself.

She found Miss Margaret at the place next door. The lady from there was talking and talking. ". . . and so that's the connection. My half-sister married your great-great uncle, Chester Raines." Miss Margaret didn't seem to hear what she was saying.

She didn't give much sign of hearing what Anniette said, either, except to drift away through the trees in the direction of the house.

Anniette apologized. Just because They didn't always tell you what you wanted was no reason to be rude to Them.

"Oh, don't concern yourself," the lady said. "Not everyone is as equanimitous as you are. That means," she went on before Anniette could ask, "that not everyone is able to take the situation in stride. In fact, most are not able to take it in at all."

Like Uncle Troy, she thought. He got scared when he saw the lady with the candlestick. Which reminded her to wonder why he'd lied, why he told Miss Margaret that story about the song.

"The truth," said the lady, "can sometimes lead to unpleasant conclusions. As a potential philosopher, you should learn to understand this."

"I detest this spot," she added. "I always have." And then Anniette was alone.

* * *

Vacation had just barely begun, but already it was time to leave. Gransie was riding the train down to Chicago with Miss Margaret for the funerals. Roger had already gone; he left the same day as the Sheriff came. Miss Margaret didn't seem to miss him. The last time Anniette saw her, she was standing on the verandah, staring out across the lawn. She was all dressed in black, stiff and quiet.

Mommy came and picked her up at lunch, so Gransie and Miss Margaret could leave with Uncle Troy in time to catch the 2:45. Anniette hated cars; usually she got sick in them. But she was so glad to be with Mommy again that she forgot about that. Mommy let her lie with her head on her lap, on the soft beige skirt she wore. Just before she drifted off to sleep, Anniette remembered that she'd left the box behind.

Most of the rest of that summer Anniette spent at the library, downtown. It was cool in there, like the lake, and she found plenty to explore. Between columns covered with rose and olive tiles, she entered books on butterflies, books on boogie-woogie, books on Buddha, books on books.

Later, other libraries led her further on her search to understand "what makes the flower." The seed it comes from or the light toward which it grows? By the time she was ready to leave the University, it seemed to Anniette that these were the two most likely choices. Trying to decide, she examined her past, her seed. She came to no conclusions. But she learned many things.

For example, she found out that for her forty years of service to the Rainses, Gransie received a lump sum of five hundred dollars. She lived with Uncle Troy in Paw Paw on this and her Social Security, helping out at church till she came to rest in the arms of her Savior.

The deed in the hidey-hole had probably been valid—at the time it was drawn up. And the law student Anniette talked to thought that because Rachel's descendants continued to live there, they might have had "visible, notorious, and open possession" of the place. *If* the deed had ever been registered at court, *if* it could be proved that the Rainses had conspired to prevent their claim, *if* . . .

But Miss Margaret had sold the place as soon after the funerals as was humanly possible. The buyer paid an extremely low price, since it was rumored to be haunted. The price was low, but the buyer didn't exactly get a bargain, for the house burned down before he could set foot on the property.

The bell never rang. ●

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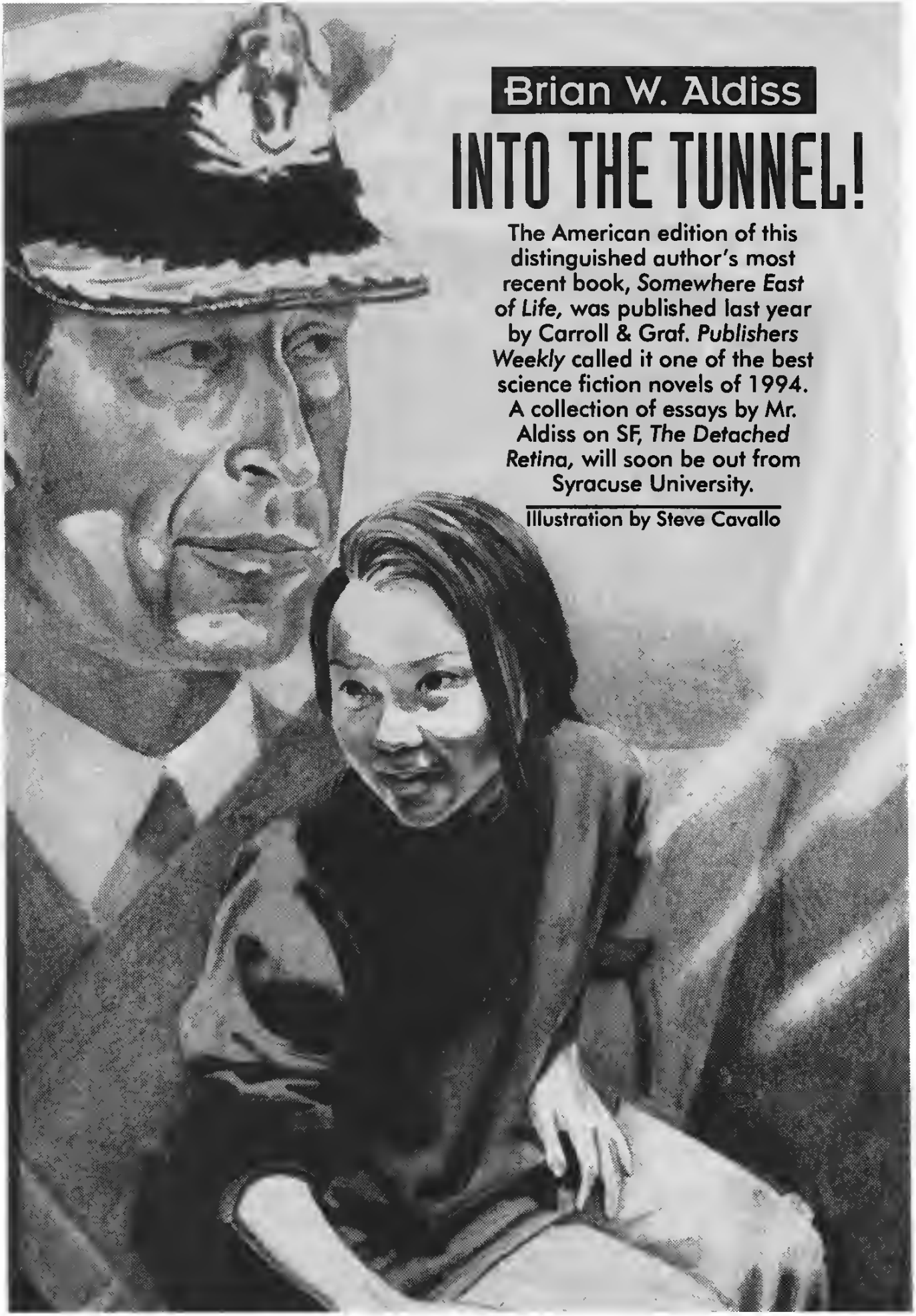


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Brian W. Aldiss

INTO THE TUNNEL!

The American edition of this distinguished author's most recent book, *Somewhere East of Life*, was published last year by Carroll & Graf. *Publishers Weekly* called it one of the best science fiction novels of 1994. A collection of essays by Mr. Aldiss on SF, *The Detached Retina*, will soon be out from Syracuse University.

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

The A-road ran like a strip of magnesium from Singapore, only a degree from the equator, straight up the Malay peninsula.

West of Bangkok came the road's first great junction. Vehicles taking the right-hand lanes saw before them a great serpent carrying much of the freight of the Pacrim countries, as far as Manchuria and beyond. Skirting the coast, the A-road forged northward. It leaped across the Bering Straits, heading for Anchorage and the infinite highway systems of the CanAm Union.

To take the left-hand lanes by Bangkok was to head for a different world. There, the A-road curled westward to run under the ramparts of the Himalayas. It began to climb, to wind. It skirted Kashgar and drove through mountains to Kazakhstan, where it forged north, into Russia.

Curling about Volgograd, it became part of the European system. Here the highway sprouted three main tentacles and many lesser ones.

The middle tentacle took in Vienna, Prague, Frankfurt—many auxiliary tentacles here, mainly in the form of ten-lane highways—to Brussels and so to the French coast near Calais. It dipped below the waters of the English Channel and through the Channel Tunnel, close by the site of the old twentieth century tunnel, toward London and northward, until it expired near Edinburgh in a maze of recharging stations.

"Why can't we drive right on to Edinburgh?" May Coombe asked. Their quanzy—designation Quanzy Horas 3—was heading smoothly toward Ypres. May's father, Pete, sat at the wheel, although the autoputer was driving.

Pete laughed. "You know why! Your gramps is going to live in London."

May walked to the rear of the quanzy. The thousand-ton vehicle was tooling along between the set speeds of seventy and one hundred kilometers per hour. Apart from May and her father and grandfather, there were ten Singaporean women, highly trained medics, aboard, dedicated patrollers of the Euro-Asian transit routes. The quanzy—the Chinese name meant "circle" or "roundabout"—took a month on its round-trip patrol from Edinburgh to Singapore and back. The mobile hospital dealt with almost any accident to which it might be summoned.

Hugh Coombe greeted his grand-daughter warmly. He was in the observation lounge, chatting to an off-duty medic.

"Are you comfy, gramps?," she asked. She was sorry for Hugh, although he was sometimes bad-tempered. It wasn't only because he was into his eighties. "Hugh's nearly dead, isn't he?" she had once asked her mother. When he gestured resignedly, she said, "We're coming up to the Tunnel soon. . . . Was it very hairy for you in—you know, the old tunnel?"

It certainly was hairy. Hugh Coombe had turned twenty-one in those

fine May days of 1994, when the first Channel Tunnel was dedicated. He was then a hard-hat computer operator, when computers still had silicon chips in them. He worked in the service tunnel.

"The Tube," as on-site workers called it, consisted of two large-bore tunnels with a narrower service tunnel running between them. Hugh worked in the service tube, fifteen feet wide, an average of 120 feet below the sea bed. The two big tubes carried only rail traffic, single line each way. But in those days, the enterprise was a new wonder. France and England were linked for the first time since the Ice Age by the world's three longest undersea tunnels.

Hugh was a scruffy little man, not much liked by his fellow workers. He had picked up computing skills in Maidstone prison, where he had served six months for GBH. The Tube was his idea of heaven, because it resembled nowhere else. Under his overalls beat a romantic heart. Here, he could pretend he was on the Moon or another planet.

The security, that May day, was intense. The Queen was coming. Britain had been undergoing terrorist attacks previously, and the tunnel entrances provided tempting targets. As Hugh Coombes entered the Tube that morning, he approved of the police presence and the helicopters overhead. The Eurotunnel Company knew that a slip-up today would spell disaster for their investments.

"They're protecting our lives as well as the Queen's," Hugh said to a mate. "Even if they don't see it that way."

"They're protecting their bloody shares, not you and me," was the reply. "They've got plans to build roads from here to Central Asia. . . ."

As with many great engineering enterprises, the Tunnel had its teething problems. The trouble lay not with the tunnel itself but with its complex signaling systems and with the trains designed to run through it.

And there, unknown to anyone, lay the beginnings of a new era, when railroads would be obsolescent and intelligent highroads designed for megavehicles would girdle the Earth.

Regular passenger services between London and Continental Europe did not begin until late in November 1994. Early the next year, the Tunnel had a royal visitor.

Last minute work continued inside as usual. Electrical engineers were working on the signaling systems and their computerization.

It was some surprise when the foreman came along and said they were going to get a royal visit shortly. The visit had only just been announced, for security reasons.

H.R.H. Prince Charles flew in to the Folkestone site in an Army helicopter, with a minimum of fuss. He and his two aides were greeted on

the pad by Chief Inspector of Police Gladys Barrett. Barrett was heavily built and heavily browed. She saluted the prince and announced that she was delegated accompany him into the workings.

Charles raised an eyebrow at one of the aides.

"Sinclair was ill and couldn't make it," said the aide into Charles's ear. "We've checked Barrett out with MI5 and she's kosher."

Charles gave a half-smile. "Chosen for efficiency over looks, I suppose. Let's go."

And their vehicle moved into the tunnel.

May had cried during the first part of the journey, although she liked exploring the quanzy. She had left her mother, Fay Fan Tan, in Singapore. Fan Tan's partner-contract with Pete Coombe had expired and she was making new arrangements.

The scenery along the Himalayan section of the route had a cheering effect. The great sledded hospital coasted through many miles of SS—the Sieve-Sleeve arching protectively over the E-road. Through its mesh, range on range of snowy mountains glittered.

Old Hugh had asked his grand-daughter what "SS" stood for.

"Hundreds of miles of route are protected in this way, gramps. Didn't you know that? It's Fourth World stuff out there. They simply hate the First World highways. They think we're too rich at their expense. . . ."

She laughed, but at the Nanga Parbat turnoff they met trouble.

A Paris-Peking flier had hit a two-hundred ton cattle freighter charging northward from the Delhi Driveway. Quanzy Horas 3 was the first hospital to arrive on the scene of the accident. Injured passengers from the flier mingled with wounded sheep from the freighter. Rescue teams from a nearby service station had moved in to assist. All East-West lanes were closed to traffic.

Behind the arches of steel mesh, villagers from the surrounding hills raged and shouted. Their fingers protruded through the mesh interstices like thousands of accusing maggots. May stood on the grooved highway watching, excited and scared, clutching Pete's hand.

Shots were fired through the fence. A flier passenger, crawling from the wreckage of her vehicle, screamed and fell.

Members of the rescue team beamed VLF sound at the villagers. The very low frequencies caused vomiting and other non-lethal problems. Women in rags ran shrieking back into the barren hills.

"Was your meeting with the Prince as bad as Nanga Parbat?," May asked her grandfather, as Quanzy Horas 3 roared beyond the French coast into the tunnel.

It was sixty-one years ago, but Hugh remembered it vividly. That

morning in March 1995, he'd been in the service tunnel when Prince Charles appeared, looking relaxed as usual. Like Hugh, the prince was wearing a yellow hardhat. Chief Inspector Barrett stood just behind him.

Hugh was at one of the cross-over passages linking all three tunnels; such passages occurred every 375 metres. He was hunched over his IBM, on a railed gallery above the visitors. He stood as a mark of respect. As a vocal critic of the royal family, he was amazed to find himself almost bowing.

Hydraulic engineers had been working below him, and opening up various inspection doors, but had moved further along the tunnel. Hugh was alone when the prince's vehicle stopped and Charles stepped down to look around.

"Do you find it spooky down here?," the prince asked, calling up at Hugh.

"At least we're out of the rain," Hugh said. And in that instant he recognized Barrett.

In his rough days, he had run heroin in London's docklands. One night, waiting for his contact in a dark doorway, he had been unwilling witness to a murder.

It was after midnight. As he stood concealed, a limousine drew up nearby, with a male driver and a woman in the passenger seat. Almost at once, a youngster—possibly fifteen years old—sped up on a mountain bike. He wore a black balaclava. Braking at the waiting car, he pulled a packet from under his bomber jacket and handed it to the woman in the car. She produced a pistol and shot the lad dead at point blank range.

Hugh never forgot the face in the car. It belonged to the woman now masquerading as a police inspector. Of course it came out later that the real Barrett had been done away with on her way to the tunnel terminal. "Barrett"—the false one—was a wanted terrorist with a record in Berlin, Paris, and Belfast.

Her reflexes were sharp. Without knowing who Hugh Coombe was, she caught recognition in his eyes. Whatever her plan had been, she acted immediately. She dragged her service revolver out and fired.

Fired not immediately at the prince, but into one of the open inspection covers. Then she aimed her weapon at Charles.

Below the inspection hatch ran 400 mm pipes. Through the pipes was driven chilled sea water at pressure, so that temperatures in the tunnels remained at comfortable levels. The shots shattered the plastic piping. Jets of water erupted, spraying the visiting party.

Hugh acted without thought.

He would save anyone's life, even a prince's. . . .

Wrenching up his monitor, he flung it, catching "Barrett" between the

shoulders. Her shot, aimed at Charles, went wild. Its echoes spanged down the tunnel.

Hugh jumped over the rail and down, to land next to "Barrett" in a smother of icy water. By then, the two startled aides were on her, but she turned, fighting wildly, broke away, and fired at Hugh. Three quick shots. Shattering his legs.

Then Charles had an arm round her throat.

The tour of the tunnel — that modest twentieth century Channel Tunnel—triumph of engineering for its time—had gone ahead undisturbed. The broken pipes were repaired almost immediately. Within an hour, the false Barrett was in a police cell and Hugh Coombe in hospital. Prince Charles was remarkably cool. He had driven on with his shaken aides to a French reception and a change of clothes.

He visited Hugh later, after the operations on Hugh's legs.

And if Charles had been assassinated? Public opinion is a fickle thing. A curse would have been on the tunnel. Many potential passengers, biased already, would have boycotted it. Returns on investments would have been too slow for comfort. Emergence from lingering recession would have been delayed. Europe would probably have stagnated.

Certainly the grandiose plans for great highways to link Europe with Asia, and Asia with North America, would have been shelved.

Instead, the heroism of Coombe and the coolness of the prince became a kind of legend. The grandiose plans were unrolled. And so were prospects for a new global prosperity—at least for those who already prospered. . . .

Quanzy Horas 3 thundered without pause through the great new tunnel, heading for Dover. The walls of the tunnel flickered with startling imagery, scenes beamed from Mars, golden sands, surf, jungles lashed by monsoon rain. Keeping those who traveled amused. It was like blasting through a rainbow.

May had managed to get her grandfather up to the front cabin. She, her father, and old Hugh sat together, rather serious now.

They covered the sixty kilometers undersea in under the hour. As the vehicle emerged into sunshine, there was Dover, there were the white cliffs, there was England.

And there by the security check zone, high on its plinth, stood the statue to Hugh Coombe. May gave a squeal of delight as her father pointed it out. Using artistic license, the sculptor had depicted Hugh as he had been, with both legs intact.

Then the quanzy was flashing by, unpausing on its way to London. ●

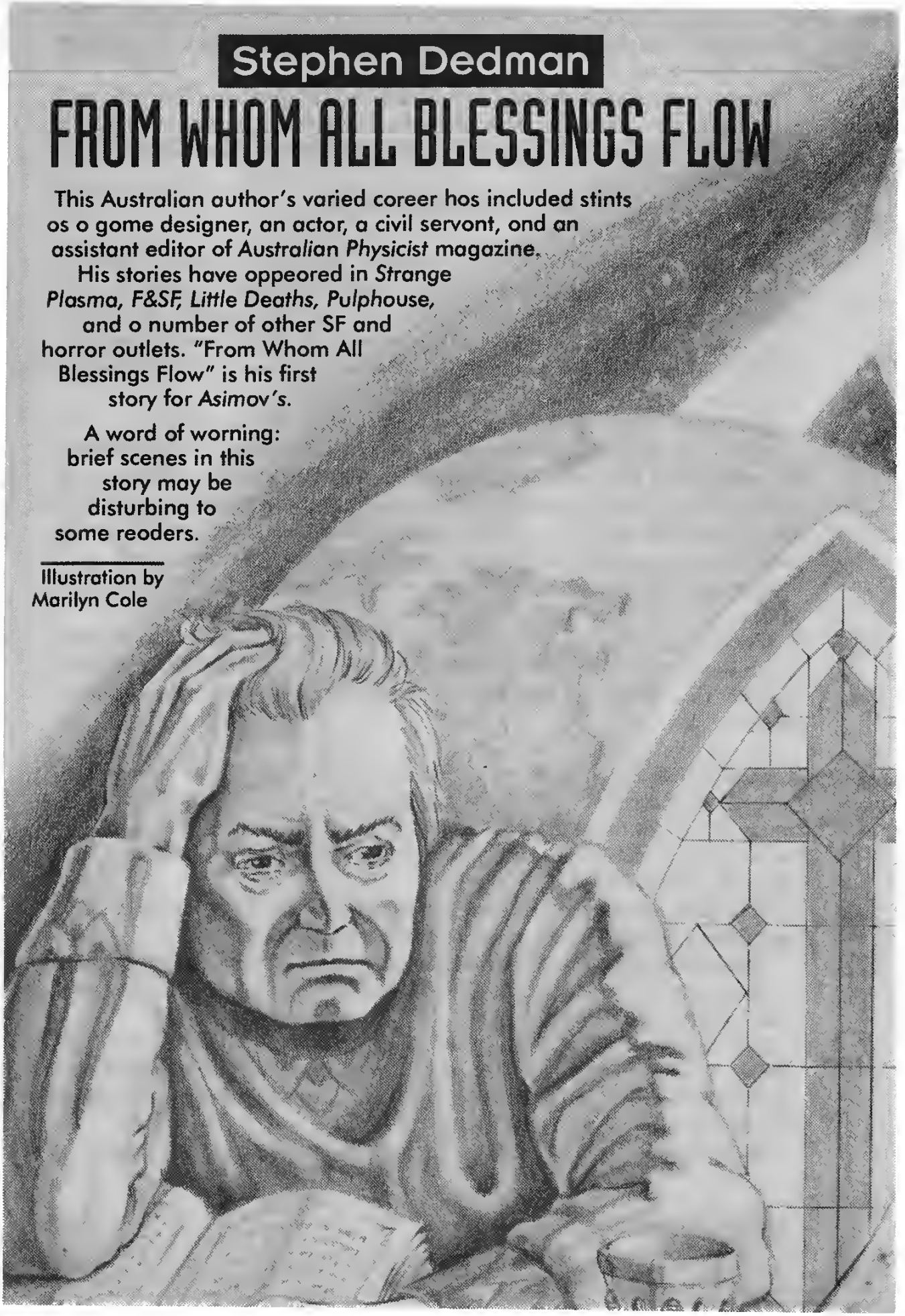
Stephen Dedman

FROM WHOM ALL BLESSINGS FLOW

This Australian author's varied coreer hos included stints os o gome designer, an actor, a civil servont, ond an assistant editor of *Australian Physicist* magazine. His stories have oppeored in *Strange Plasma, F&SF, Little Deaths, Pulphouse,* and o number of other SF and horror outlets. "From Whom All Blessings Flow" is his first story for *Asimov's.*

A word of worning: brief scenes in this story may be disturbing to some reoders.

Illustration by Marilyn Cole





Haarina Schroeder, the inventor of the Bifrost Bridge, was born in what later became known as World One, which was fine as long as the only other World discovered had a population of a few million humans and trillions of mutated rats. The next World contacted, however, was technologically advanced enough to build their end of a Bifrost Bridge, and they refused to accept the title of World Three. After a few months of (occasionally acrimonious) discussion, World One became World Green, and World Three, World Blue, largely because of the background colors of their respective U.N. flags. Their histories had diverged sharply in 1906, when the English Revolution didn't happen in World Blue—mostly because some of the ringleaders were already dead, or not in London. Historians had found minor divergences as far back as 1879, and some joked about the *real* divergence points being lost in prehistory.

World Two became World Cyan, but none of the rats were heard to complain—at least, not to the historians. Then there was World Azure, where Robert Kennedy had been *fatally* shot; and World Indigo, where there hadn't been a Great Fire of London; and then another cold ruin which was christened World Grey and quickly abandoned . . . and then, a world so different from World Green that none of their living languages were recognizable, which became known on the other Worlds as World Red. By this time, Schroeder had retired to an estate in Green-Nova Scotia, surrounded herself with the best sound system available in any of the Worlds and refused to speak to *anyone.* Meanwhile, hundreds of lawyers, politicians, and other bureaucrats were trying to write a set of interWorld trade laws that would give their own homeWorld the maximum share of any hitherto undiscovered uninhabited or underdeveloped Worlds . . . and then a delegate from World Red, speaking in perfect pre-Homeric Greek, made an offer that made the emerald mines of Cyan-Brazil look like a handful of change.

Dearborn finished washing his hands, and stepped over to the hot-air dryer. "I know it's none of my business," he said, "but it's just *too* good a deal. I don't trust them."

Anagnostakos, listening, wondered if all the decisions for *all* the inhabited Worlds were made in men's washrooms. Monsignor Whately, sitting in the cubicle at his right, said, "You're right. It *is* too good an offer—too good to refuse—and, as far as I'm concerned, it *is* none of your business."

"Are you sure the interpreters got it right? It wasn't the Donation of Constantine in Classical High Tibetan?"

Anagnostakos ignored the insult: he was more startled that Dearborn had *heard* of the Donation of Constantine. Maybe the Azure-American had a professional interest in fraud—or, more likely, some researcher in his staff had found the reference and expected it to embarrass the Jesuit.

The *Constitutum Constantini* had supposedly given the Roman Catholic church authority over all Christianity, but was later proven to be a fairly poor forgery written four centuries after Constantine's death.

"I'm sure enough," replied Whately, mildly. "Of course, we don't need their help as badly as you do. . . ."

Fifteen love, though Anagnostakos, wincing inwardly. World Blue had a population of fewer than six billion people, as against World Green's eight and a half, World Azure's ten, and World Indigo's thirteen (most of them starving). World Blue could also boast blue whales, gorillas, and tigers still living in the wild, and breathable air in all but its largest cities.

"Some *help*," snapped Dearborn. "Okay, so they're building their end of the Bridge, but we're supposed to give them *millions* of our people, and I bet *we* have to do the fucking paperwork! Where is this land they're offering them, anyway? Antarctica?"

"All over the World: Canada, Brazil, Indonesia, Australasia, Southern Africa, Eastern Russia, South-East Asia. Underpopulated areas, but arable with the right techniques."

"Sure," said Dearborn, sarcastically.

"Have you ever seen Indigo-Australia? It was settled by the Spanish and their Mediterranean allies, who saw it as a beautiful country—unlike the English who landed there in *our* Worlds, who regarded it as a desolate hellhole. Now it's supporting a quarter of a billion people—probably the best fed people in World Indigo. Green-Australia's not as crowded, but it's nearly as rich: after they broke with England, they encouraged immigration from countries with similar climates and soils."

"Slave labor," muttered Dearborn. Whately's only answer was to flush the toilet, loudly.

"I still don't like it."

"*You* don't have to go: they're asking for volunteers. I think they'll get them."

"Not if we say no to the Bridges, they won't," Dearborn replied, and walked out, slamming the door behind him.

"Whatever happened to 'Give me your poor, your tired, your huddled masses'?" asked Anagnostakos, emerging from his cubicle.

Whately laughed. "I take it you're going to vote 'yes'?"

"I'm just a humble interpreter: I don't get a vote."

"How's the translation going?"

"Slowly. We haven't really tried to learn each other's native language—apparently theirs, Arrinesh, is descended from Sumerian the same way English is descended from niederdeutsch—but we're fairly sure that we understand each other's Greek. Of course, there's a lot of modern abstractions that we're having trouble getting across. I know a certain amount

of Red-Japanese, but their new Katakana are unrecognizable, and Japanese is easy enough to misunderstand at the best of times. Apart from that, there are a few Native American languages that are the same in all the Worlds except Indigo, but their written alphabets are completely unlike ours and there's almost nothing published in them anyway. The stuff we *need* has to be translated at least twice to be of any use to anyone, and that's painfully slow."

"What about their Bible?"

Anagnostakos shrugged. "I'm afraid I don't know. Why?"

"I've seen a copy—untranslated, of course, but illuminated. Your opposite number, their interpreter—Dr. Melle?—lent it me. Their Old Testament is unrecognizable, as is much of the New, but the four Gospels are there. And since they *do* use arabic numerals, I've been able to count the chapters and verses, and there are some interesting discrepancies. Their 'Mark,' for example ends at Chapter 16, Verse 9, but there are verses . . . " He stopped; Anagnostakos was shaking his head. "What's wrong?"

"Their 'Mark' is more likely 'Mary,' Monsignor." said Anagnostakos, gently. "Matthew, Martha; Luke, Lucy; John, Joan. Their 'Old Testament' seems to be Sumerian or Babylonian—"

"But they believe in *Christ,*" replied Whately. "Their interpreter wears a crucifix, almost identical to mine, and I've seen her cross herself. The crucifixion picture in their Bible is the same as ours, even down to the woman kneeling before the cross, and the Last Supper—."

"Their interpreter is a priestess. Their 'pope' is a woman, the 'World Mother.' How long has the Catholic Church in World Blue been ordaining women? Over here, it's been less than fifty years. Their 'Christ' may not even be the same person, or have said the same things—and if He did, they were translated into entirely different languages, and cross-referenced to different prophecies, a different mythos, maybe even a different *ethos*. Besides, do the Christians on *your* World always agree with each other?" The diminutive interpreter shook the water from his hands, and walked out. Whately followed him.

"Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?" he asked, quietly.

"No, I guess not."

"About your religion?"

Anagnostakos shrugged. "My grandmother was Greek Orthodox, and she used to drag me along to services until I was too heavy to drag—but I haven't been inside a church since her funeral, and that was nearly twenty years ago. I went to a Catholic college in Melbourne, on a scholarship, but I think they would have expelled me if I hadn't kept winning the language prize. I've been exposed to every major religion on Earth—well, Earth Green—and none of them have stuck. No, that's not quite

true—some of them stuck in my craw. I've seen holy war, sanctified bigotry, sacramental starvation. . . . Hell, even back home—in Green-Australia—there was a Muslim community that practiced what they euphemistically call 'female circumcision.' Let's say I'm an ethical atheist."

"Do you believe in Christ?"

"Only as an historical figure."

"I'm not going to act as an apologist for religion," said Whately, nodding rapidly. "Or even for Catholicism: I have family in Blue-Belfast. But none of the religious wars were *Christ's* fault.

"We've both seen World Red. It's cleaner than our homeWorlds, and less violent, and no one seems to be starving or homeless—"

"True," said Anagnostakos, "but maybe they have the death penalty for everything from graffiti to speeding—not that it's easy to speed in those electric cars—or compulsory euthanasia, or a suicide cult . . . or maybe their medical science is a few centuries behind ours, or they're suffering from an epidemic which only kills the poor, or they expose their children. It would explain why they need their gene pool boosted. . . ." He looked at the priest's ashen face, and then smiled gently. "Don't worry, Monsignor; I'm just playing Devil's Advocate. It's a hobby of mine. I *like* all the Reds I've met; they seem . . . peaceful, at home—the way Zen Buddhists are supposed to be," he added, teasingly; then, "It's almost as though they don't have the concept of 'foreign.' "

The ambassador smiled. "I think I know what you mean. Wouldn't you be interested in learning *why?*"

"Of course, but—"

"Doesn't religion play a large part in shaping a society's attitudes and behavior?"

"Yes, but—"

"We know the RedWorlders invented the printing press thousands of years ago. Their gospels may not have been misinterpreted, censored and rewritten like those of our homeWorlds," concluded Whately, hastily. "Wouldn't that be a logical place to start looking for the secret?"

Anagnostakos stared at him for several seconds, and then smiled broadly. "I always wondered what 'Jesuitical reasoning' was: now I think I know. But what if you don't like what you find?"

"Monsignor?"

Whately looked up from his newsfax, eyebrows raised. "Yes?"

"I've spoken to Dr. Melle," said Anagnostakos. "She's offered to take us to meet a teacher of hers on World Red, a priestess who should have, or should be able to find, a facsimile edition of their gospels."

"That's wonderful!" Whately dropped his fax, reached for the interpreter's hand, and pumped it vigorously. "Thank you *very* much."

Anagnostakos smiled, and tried to disengage his hand. "We'll have to leave on Wednesday afternoon, at two: the priestess has a very busy schedule—we're lucky she could find a few minutes to accommodate us—and the temple is quite a long drive from the Bridge. I wouldn't expect to be back before seven."

"I can leave Panosian in charge for an afternoon: he's good, and he disagrees with almost everything Dearborn is likely to say. Are there any strictures I should know about?"

"Melle didn't mention any. They don't seem to have a dress code in Ptolemaios, what we call Red-Alexandria—the outfits the delegates wear are part habit, part weatherproofing. Your mufti may look uncomfortable, but at least they'll know you're from out of town. Melle suggested that *I* not wear a tie or a vest: apparently, the Reds think they look ridiculous, and only seasoned diplomats could keep themselves from laughing at me.

"Besides, we won't be mixing with the populace; I don't speak Arrinesh that well, anyway. We're to let Melle act as guide and take us from the bridge to the car, from the car to the temple, and then back the same way."

"Thank you again. I wish there was some way I could repay you."

"Just vote 'yes' on Friday," replied Anagnostakos, smiling.

"Oh, I planned to." Whately gave the younger man's hand another enthusiastic shake, and then calmed himself down. "You know, you're much smarter than you give yourself credit for, Mr. Anagnostakos. You'd be *much* better at my job than I am—let alone Dearborn."

Anagnostakos shrugged. "I'm a street kid. I can learn any language you want, but I still forget which fork I'm supposed to use, and I'm the world's worst—" he hesitated: he'd been about to say "liar," but realized that the priest might consider that term an insult. "Poker player," he finished, rather lamely, but just as accurately.

"That boss of yours isn't much better."

"Oh, don't let that smile fool you. Besides, *he* isn't one sixty-eight in stacked heels."

"One hundred and sixty-eight?"

"Centimetres—I think it's about five foot five in Olde English. Jimmy has a *granddaughter* who's taller than me." He glanced at his digital watch (an import from Japan-Azure), and swore mildly. "I'm late. See you Wednesday."

"Goodbye," said Whately, "and again—thank you."

* * *

Whately peered through the windows of the electric car at the suburban streets of Red-Alexandria. The houses, new or old (it was difficult to tell), seemed to be built of the same colorful material (ceramic? plastic? one-way glass?), in much the same style—plenty of parabolic arches, a minimum of straight lines, and no sharp corners. He noticed more greenery than he thought Egypt could support, and pristine statues that might have been new or centuries old, and though the road was wide, he saw very few cars. He was wondering how Red-Ireland must look, when Anagnostakos said, "Monsignor?"

"Yes?"

"Dr. Melle would like to ask you a question."

"Certainly."

"Why are all the ambassadors at the summit men? I've explained why for *my* World, as best I can, but maybe yours is different?"

"Well . . . there *are* female diplomats and ambassadors on World Blue, of course, many of them in the U.N. . . . but unfortunately, few of them have any experience as trade envoys. Where would they get the experience? We can't send them to Blue-Japan, much less any of the OPEC countries: they'd think we were insulting them. And only rich countries can afford women's rights movements: women in the poor countries don't have the leisure or the access to communications.

"In fact, women had been without most rights for so many centuries in all of our Worlds, the little progress that *was* made in my World over the last century is something of a miracle. Women still can't vote in most countries in World Indigo, and while progress was being made in Azure, it was reversed in the 1980s and '90s when Azure-America went from World leader to . . . can you translate that?"

"I think so, though I'm not sure that I understand all of it."

"That makes two of us. Are we nearly there?"

"Yes: in fact, we're ahead of schedule. I'm sorry we've both been talking shop. . . ."

Whately waved a hand as though brushing away flies. "Don't worry: I've been enjoying the scenery. Tell Dr. Melle that she's lucky to live in such a lovely World."

Anagnostakos translated that, and then said, "That's the temple ahead. She says it'll be nearly twenty minutes before Dr. Esa is free. Do you want to tour around, wait in her office, or would you rather see a service?"

"A service?"

"Yes: she'll be giving some people . . . I think 'Communion' would be the right word. Dr. Melle wondered if you, as another priest of Christ, might be interested."

Whately gulped. "Tell her that I'd be fascinated."

* * *

Whately sat in the back of the church, wishing that God might grant him—if only for an hour—the gift of tongues. Even Anagnostakos couldn't understand the World Red vernacular well enough to translate, and Whately was desperate to know whether Dr. Esa's sermon was as Christian as the fittings of the temple. Faith, he told himself. Have faith.

Finally, a number of the congregation moved to the railing at the head of the church, and knelt before it—some with hands behind their backs, some with hands clasped in prayer, and Whately's eyes filled with tears of joy. Dr. Esa, wearing a burgundy-colored kimono-like robe, stepped toward them. "Take and eat it," translated Anagnostakos, in a murmur, "This is my body. Drink; this is my blood, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." Then, as the offWorlders watched, Dr. Esa opened the divided skirt of her robe, and guided a boy's face toward her groin. Then she moved over to the girl beside him, and repeated the gesture.

The boy, feeling the pressure of Whately's stare, turned around. Whately saw blood on his lips, and screamed.

"They've voted against any migration," said Anagnostakos. "Unanimously."

Melle stared, and then translated for the ambassador and her staff. The ambassador's reply needed no interpretation: "Why?"

"Officially? I suspect they'll say it's because they need to do more research, to pick the right people, to prevent a violent clash between two dissimilar cultures. . . . The truth is far more simple. Whately told them about your church service."

"I don't understand."

"On *our* Worlds, they perform the same ritual with bread symbolizing the body, and wine symbolizing the blood—"

"Wine?" Melle erupted with a most un-diplomatic fury. "But that's a *travesty!* It's—"

"Blasphemy?"

"Worse!"

"Obscenity, maybe? I suspect that's the word Whately used."

The ambassador cleared her throat, and asked a question. Melle translated. "What will happen to the millions starving on your Worlds? What will they tell them?"

Anagnostakos shrugged. "They'll think of some excuse. Dearborn suggested they be sent to World Cyan, that he'd rather deal with the rats—as though it were *his* problem. I'm not a scientist, so I don't know how feasible a colony there would be, but I suspect they'll try. Whately also recommended they close *all* the bridges to World Red."

Melle translated this, and the ambassador and her staff were silent. Finally, the ambassador spoke.

"What about you?"

"Me?"

"If they do close the bridge," Melle translated, "which side will you be on?"

"I don't understand."

"You have no home in your World," the ambassador continued. "You've not lived in the same city for as much as a year since you were twenty-three—and now you're thirty-six?"

"I like traveling."

"We have a *World* that you haven't seen, with a hundred new languages for you to learn. And you're an interpreter. Your job is helping people to understand each other. On our World, you could help us to understand thirty billion people. . . . "

"And," added Melle, "if the bridge is re-opened, you could help them to understand *us*."

"I'm really not sure that's possible. . . ." Anagnostakos replied. He tried not to sound tempted, but he'd never been a good liar: Melle knew that he'd already accepted the offer.

"Think it over," she said, "but don't tell anyone. They may try to stop you."

"Of course, there's one other option," said Dearborn, wiping his hands.

Whately, who'd been staying drunk for days in an effort to avoid a near-lethal hangover, grunted non-committally. As far as he was concerned, now that all the Reds had returned to their homeWorld, the Bridge apparatus should be dismantled without delay.

"Military. We invade."

Whately nodded, then suddenly sat bolt upright. "You're joking!"

"Hell, no! Move the bridge to one of their uninhabited areas and drop in a few million troops from each World, take one continent at a time. . . ."

"But what about . . . " Whately tried to remember the word "proselytizing," failed, and finally blurted out, "cultural contamination?"

"Biowar?" Dearborn mused. "I don't think we know enough about their immune—"

"No!" snapped Whately, winced, and continued quietly, "No . . . I mean . . . their relig . . . uh, their cult? *You* know? What if some of the troops, uh, especially the women . . . what if they . . . learn about it, get converted to it—"

"So we lose a few sol—"

Whately finally found the words he wanted, and used them. "What if they bring it *back* with them, for Christ's sake?"

"Oh," said Dearborn, and considered this. "Oh. Well . . . we won't send any female troops over. The men won't . . . well, they just *won't*. Besides," he said, recovering his confidence, "the Reds *can't* corrupt us. None of them know our language, and vice versa—right?"

II

Anagnostakos closed the door behind him and locked kit, then staggered the remaining few steps to the bed—taking great care, despite his fatigue, not to tread on any books. He kicked off his boots, and collapsed face down. When he looked up a moment later, he realized that hours had passed; the room was dark, and someone was rattling the door. "Melle?"

"Yes."

"Come in," he said, rolling over and rubbing his eyes. The lights, sensitive to heat and motion, brightened as she entered the untidy room.

"Were you asleep?"

"Huh? Yeah." He stood, a little unsteadily. "Where are we going tonight?"

Melle regarded him carefully, and then shook her head. "Nowhere. Sleep is more important. I'll call for some food."

"You know, that's the longest speech in English I've heard all day," Anagnostakos replied, unlacing his jacket. "Where *are* we going? The theater again?"

"The play will be on tomorrow night. Sophocles has been dead for centuries; *you* need to sleep. You've been working too much."

"I was a teacher for years. That's how I managed to see the world—one World, anyway. I'll admit, I've never had a class where everyone was so bright *and* enthusiastic, and that's as tiring as herding cats . . . but I'll cope." He stepped out of his trousers, and pulled on another pair with practiced haste. As far as he could tell, RedWorlders didn't have any nudity taboos, but he hadn't quite lost his own. "What time's the show? Can we eat first?"

"How long did you sleep in the night?"

"I don't know. About five hours—call it eight *tou*." She looked at him dubiously, and then glanced at the books beside the bed. "Okay, maybe seven. I read for a while. There's so much I don't *know* yet. Anywhere else I go, I know *something* about the taboos and the customs, what I can and can't do and say and wear and eat, where I can and can't go, and when, how rich or poor the people are . . . "

"I understand that," replied Melle.

"I'm not sure you do. All I know of your geography is that Wa is Japan and Nura is Australia, and a little about the Concordat. I know some

Arrinesh, though not as well as you know English, but there's hundreds of languages, thousands of years worth of history, millions of books and plays . . . *we've* only had the printing press for a few centuries, not four millennia. We probably lost half a million books when the Library of Alexandria burnt down—hundreds of plays by Sophocles and Aeschylus and Aristophanes and Euripides, the complete works of Berossus and Hecataeus and Hypatia, all stuff you take for granted and that academics on Green would murder their grandmothers for. . . . And the beautiful things the women here have done, books and paintings that never existed on our Worlds at all, except maybe in someone's head. . . . In any of the other Worlds, I'm a well-traveled and educated man; here, I'm an ignorant barbarian. And I'm a Greek: we *invented* the term barbarian, to describe everyone else!"

Melle laughed. "The Arrinesh word 'hort' means roughly the same, and is probably even older—but I haven't heard anyone use it to describe you. Is that all?"

"No. I really do love what I've seen of this World. All the time I've been here, I don't think I've seen anything ugly or dangerous; I *know* I haven't seen anyone who looks beaten, or frightened, or hungry, or even seriously angry. I was scared, for a while, that the men might be treated as badly here as women are in the other Worlds, but if they are, I haven't seen it. I *have* wondered why there are so few men in my classes—"

"There are very few men in the Councils, at present," Melle admitted. "The Concordat, and most of its member-states, has been led by a coalition of religious and women-only parties for the past eleven years—and, of course, they appoint ambassadors who will agree with their policies. So most of the women in your classes are diplomats, while nearly all the men are teachers or linguists—there are plenty of men in the universities, especially the sciences, and even in the church; they can do anything but give the sacrament."

"And become Worldmother."

"The Worldmother must actually have *been* a mother, with at least one son and one daughter . . . but that's mostly symbolic, like most of her powers. Some people have tried to change it, but most accept that it isn't important."

"Maybe that's what I like about this world," said Anagnostakos. "You believe in a mother whose first priority is feeding her children; we pray to a father who seems more concerned with punishing them."

Melle smiled. "That's a lovely idea, but unfortunately, it isn't quite true. Not everyone is as well-fed as the people you've seen in Ptolemaios and Erech. There was a famine in Punt before you arrived; *thousands* starved before we could send enough food.

"And there are people here, even whole countries, which worship male

gods. There are even some, including a few Buddhist sects, who believe women don't have souls, but who are still known for their good works. *All* of our religions teach that you should never refuse food to anyone hungrier than yourself; life is just too valuable.

"On the other hand, not all Christians will turn the other cheek. All clergy are forbidden to bear arms, preach violence, or even raise a hand against a child or a cat—but the same law doesn't apply to the laity, many of whom serve with the army when required. And there have always been those who worship the Mother by sacrificing innocent victims—one of the oldest prayers in the Bible, by Enheduanna, praises the Goddess for 'filling the rivers with blood,' and they say there are *still* devotees of Kali Ma in Maurya and Harappa."

Anagnostakos nodded, thinking hard. "You mentioned the army. Do you still have wars?"

"Yes, of course—though not *here*. The Concordant hasn't been attacked for centuries. But the war in Funan is still going on, though both sides signed a treaty nearly twenty years ago—"

"*That's* why I need more time to study. I didn't even know you still had *armies*—"

"Do *you* still have wars? On World Green?"

"Yes—"

"How large are your armies? What weapons do your soldiers have? What about the other Worlds?"

"I don't know the precise—"

"But you *do* know they're larger than ours, and probably better armed."

"I don't know about your weapons, but the other four Worlds have—" He calculated quickly. "Nearly forty billion people between them. Most countries have between 1 or 2 percent of their population in the armed forces during peacetime, so that's about half a billion. If you could get them all to fight on the same side, which is unlikely . . . say five billion soldiers if you throw in the reserves."

"That's more than twice our total population," said Melle, softly. "That's why we *need* you to teach English. A third of your students are diplomats; the rest are teachers, who'll teach more diplomats and more teachers. When they're fluent enough to take the beginners' classes, we'll be able to reduce the tou you have to work, and you'll have more time to study. But if we're invaded, we're going to need—"

"You don't really believe that's going to happen, do you?"

Melle shrugged. "It's possible, and that possibility makes you uniquely valuable to us."

Anagnostakos looked at the books on the floor, and then sat down. "Well, since you put it like *that* . . . "

* * *

Whately grunted a greeting to Brother Luke as the younger monk dashed past him on his way to chapel. Brother Luke was an explosively devout redhead from Cork, who seemed better suited to the I.R.A. than to monastic life; he always ran, as though his need to confess something was unbearably urgent.

The Church should have copyrighted confession centuries ago, Whately thought; Alcoholics Anonymous would owe us a fortune in royalties. And that was all they ever asked *him* about; had he had a drink? had he craved a drink? as though that were the only thing he'd come to the monastery to avoid. Which suited Whately perfectly; let them believe that, he could answer *those* questions with a smile and a clear conscience. The other thing was . . .

"Brother John?"

He looked up slightly, recognizing the abbot's Chicago accent. The abbot was a short man, who reminded Whately vaguely of someone else he'd known, once. "Yes, Excellency?"

"Another letter for you. I was requested to deliver this one to you personally, and to be sure that you read it and replied. The request," he added, with a slightly sour edge to his voice, "came from the secretary of His Holiness. Apparently you've been remiss in answering your mail."

Whately blinked, and then stared at the envelope. There was neither stamp nor postmark. He'd received enough mail in recent weeks to arouse the curiosity of his fellow monks, especially as most of it had come from World Azure. Nervously, he opened it, and read through it quickly.

"Bad news?" asked the abbot, sympathetically.

Whately nodded. "It says I'm to leave at once."

"Are you surprised?"

"I wasn't expecting a papal edict," replied Whately, choosing his words with great care.

"Weren't you? You must have realized that you couldn't hide here forever."

"You think I've been hiding?"

"Yes," replied the abbot, simply. "I don't really know why, and I'm not about to ask—oh, I know you've been bitten hard by the bottle, but that's never the whole story and I suspect you could have beaten that yourself. You were a delegate to the interWorld trade talks, weren't you, before they burnt all the bridges to Red?"

Whately glanced at the letter again, and said nothing.

"And the delegate from Azure-Washington is now sitting in the White House . . . Have you been to Azure-America, John?"

"No. Have you?"

"No, but I try to keep up with the news. They're having terrible troubles there, economic and environmental, and all of them can be blamed on overpopulation, though that's an oversimplification. Even the U.S.A. thinks of itself as overpopulated; the irony is that they regard their poor as the excess, when it's their rich who consume more than—but that's by the by. What's disturbing is that the Church is being used as a scapegoat, because of *Humanae vitae,* which was never repealed over there. Widely ignored, maybe, but never actually repealed. Now, your friend Dearborn—" ("He's not my *friend,*" muttered Whately.) "—has gotten where he's gotten largely by scaremongering and pandering to prejudices. He knows there's a lot he could do to hurt the Church in Azure without it rebounding on him. On the other hand, he has no good reason to do so—which gives him an excellent bargaining chip. His people call Azure-Rome, and . . . "

Whately nodded. "Things were so much simpler when there was only one Pope."

"Amen to that. At least we all worship the same God." He sighed. "The helicopter will be picking you up tomorrow—after matins, I expect. Where were you going, confession?"

"Yes."

"Then I won't keep you. Goodbye, Brother."

Whately bowed his head, and walked slowly toward chapel, in time to hear Brother Luke burst out of the confessional and crash onto a pew. Out into the Worlds again, he thought, wearily, and realized he was shaking; he leaned against the back of another pew, but never looked up, not here, not in chapel.

He could feel the image of the Virgin Mary staring at him from behind the altar, and the mere thought, the idea of a woman in the front of a church, was enough to remind him of—

He doubled over and vomited on his sandals. Bless me Father, for I have . . .

He heard other monks running toward him, Brother Luke in the lead. Let them believe it's the alcohol that scares me, he told himself again, not the . . . Bless me, Father, for I . . . Not the obscenity, the uncleanness, the blood, the Whore of Babylon Mother of Abominations . . . Bless me, Father, for . . .

"Let your women keep silence in the churches; for it is not permitted unto them to speak."

Bless me, Father, for . . .

"For the man is not of the woman but the woman of the man."

Bless me, Father . . .

"These are they that were not defiled with women."

Bless me, Father, for . . .

"And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet color, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication."

Father . . .

After weeks of dropping hints, Melle finally came out and said it. "If you're scared of violating taboos, you can stop worrying. All of your students are adults. If you want to sex with them, you can ask; it's not forbidden, as long as you're polite and respect their right to say 'no.' " While Anagnostakos was still staring, his fork halfway to his mouth, she hurried on. "I shouldn't worry unduly. Mati seems to be as attracted to you as you are to her, and we have an old saying that the best place to learn a new language is in bed."

"We have the same saying," replied Anagnostakos, a moment later. "Though I can't vouch for its antiquity. Look, I'd better ask this now, before I make a complete fool of myself—what are the marriage customs here?"

Melle almost choked on a mouthful of salad. "I don't think she'll agree to *marry* you," she said, cautiously, after regaining her composure. "I wasn't suggesting you ask her *that;* you've only known each other for a few months. But you've been here for just over a year, now, and that's a long time to be without sex; I would have spoken sooner, but I wasn't sure of *your* taboos."

"I meant, is she already married, and does marriage mean—?" He tried to think of the Arrinesh for "monogamy." Melle stared at him, and then smiled. "Oh. I don't think she's married, I'm fairly sure she hasn't any children, and she's not wearing any warn-offs or fetishes, so it's safe to ask. For sex, I mean."

"What if she *were* married?" he pressed on. "I haven't seen a wedding here, and haven't even heard anything about them, until now. Our traditional marriage vows require the partners to 'forsake all others, until death us do part.' "

"Forsake? As in *abandon?*" Melle sounded horrified. "All others? The entire *world?*"

Anagnostakos shook his head. "Okay, so it was a bad choice of words. It mostly means 'don't have sex with,' not 'don't help' . . . "

"Why not?"

"What? Oh . . . well, originally, I suppose it's because men used to want to be sure their heirs were also their biological children, and not someone else's—passing on their own genes, as the socio-biologists would put it. So they made sure their wives were faith . . . didn't have sex with anyone else. If a married woman was raped, she was stoned to death. It was supposed to cut both ways, but it didn't; look at the *Odyssey.* Odysseus

sleeps with Kirke and Kalypso and Goddess knows who else, while Penelope sits at home and spins for eleven years. At its most extreme, of course, some Muslim sects practice clitoridectomy or 'female circumcision,' mutilating women so that they can't have orgasms." He grimaced.

Melle stared at him. "I'm sorry," she said, softly, "but I don't think I understood a single thing you just said."

Dearborn looked beefier than he had at the trade talks, though the muscles he'd built up for the campaign were already starting to turn to flab after barely a month in office. "Johnny boy!" he chortled, as Whately was ushered into the room. "Good to see you again. How're things on Blue?"

Whately was too experienced a diplomat to frown, but his voice was cool as he replied, "I haven't seen very much of it, lately, I'm afraid. I've been on retreat."

Dearborn's smile broadened into something even less pleasant. "Yeah, I heard. Doing the Lord's work. I like to think I'm doing the same." Whately grunted non-committally. "And that's why I've called for you. I've spoken to all the other delegates from the trade talks. Remember what I said, just before we closed the Bridges to Red, about the military option?" Whately stared at him. "Okay, so it was a little premature. But you musta heard what happened to our colonies on Cyan and Grey." Whately nodded. There were still a few off-shore oilrigs on both of the Blasted Worlds (as the press had taken to calling them), but they were barely paying for the energy to keep the Bridges up. "Fortunately, I'm on the record as being against it from the beginning. I mean, frankly, we might as well try to put men on the fucking moon. Even if you succeed, who the Hell wants to live on the *moon?* We haven't found any more Worlds since then, and that goddamn Schroeder woman refuses to help. But Red—Red could be the Promised Land. The Land of Milk and Honey. The Garden of Eden. You know what it looked like; none of us saw as much of it as you did."

"I saw it," replied Whately. "And you already know that I believe any contact is just too great a risk."

"Never underestimate a good publicity machine; just ask the man who's ridden one. We'll tell our boys that the Reds'll cut their balls off if they let any get close enough to talk to them; Hell, it's probably true. You missed out on the Gulf War, didn't you? Shit, it was like a video game; all anybody ever saw was blips on a screen." He grinned. "So what makes you think they can beat us?"

"Because they already have," said Whately, solemnly. "On all of our Worlds, we defeated them thousands of years ago. But on Red, they won."

* * *

"I think I understood *some* of that," said Melle, uncertainly, after Anagnostakos had spent nearly a quarter of an hour explaining. "You take the family names of your fathers?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because men still own nearly everything, and it used to be almost impossible for women to bring up their children without a father's financial support."

"Why would anyone have children they knew they couldn't feed?"

"Well, they probably didn't intend to, unless the man convinced them that he was going to marry them or something."

"But if they didn't intend to—"

Anagnostakos stared at her. "Don't women here ever become pregnant by accident?"

"No! Almost *never;* it's about as likely as having triplets. . . ." They both sat there in stunned silence, until he asked, "Since when?"

"For as long as anyone knows!" replied Melle. "Some of our oldest printed books, maybe the first ever written in Demotic, contains herbal recipes for young girls who haven't learned how to control their fertility by—I don't know if you even have a word for it, the closest I can think of is 'faith healing' "

"Biofeedback?" guessed Anagnostakos.

Melle broke the word into its roots, then nodded. "Yes. That sounds right. How long have *you* known it?"

"If we ever knew it at all, we've forgotten it," he said, softly. "For a long time, we didn't even admit that women were anything more than incubators, sure that all life came from the male, that every sperm was a miniature human waiting to be born. . . . We still have some of that attitude, but now we blame the women."

"Is that why you have nearly nine billion people?"

"It's *how;* I'm not sure about *why*. Partly because we spent most of the past few millennia expecting most of our children to die, and having as many as we could to compensate. Partly because most of our rulers wanted men for their armies. And, probably because of the first two reasons, men were taught that they weren't really men until they'd fathered sons, and women were never told that they had a choice."

"Do you mean a choice of not having children, or just a choice of not having sons?"

"You can choose the sex of your children, too?"

"We can choose not to have *sons,*" she replied. "Choosing to have them is more difficult. Sperm with the male message—I'm sorry, I don't know your word for it—"

"Chromosome."

"They're very sensitive to heat and chemical changes, very easily killed. Females are much, much tougher. It's just as well; how many men does a World need, after all?"

"The Sumerians and Babylonians, the Minoan culture, the ancient Egyptians and Greeks, even the Celts . . . they all worshipped a Mother-Goddess," said Whately. "Inanna. Ishtar. Isis. Astarte. Anahita. Artemis. Aphrodite. Athena. Danu. The myth is probably as old as language; a lot of primitive cultures even claim that a goddess taught them writing, or call the goddess 'The Great Scribe.' We don't know much about their rites, except that they used poisonous snakes; I shudder to think how. The priests, the soldiers, the judges, sometimes even the rulers, were women. They probably had no idea how babies were conceived, didn't realize men were important.

"Our ancestors—Aryans, Caucasians, whatever you choose to call them; what's important is that they worshipped God, a *male* God—came from the north into Mesopotamia about four thousand years ago, with their own laws. It was inevitable that the two cultures would clash. In our Worlds, *we* won, destroyed the temples and the idols, enforced our laws . . . but in Red, somehow, we lost." Whately took a deep breath. "To beat them this time, we would have to kill every single one of them. It might take even more than that; we'd have to destroy every *trace* of their religion. At the very least, we'd have to burn every book, unread, and even if it were possible, it wouldn't be popular with the academics. More likely, we'd have to nuke every city—Deuteronomy 12:2; 'Ye shall utterly destroy all the places, wherein the nations which ye shall possess served their gods, upon the high mountains, and upon the hills, and under every green tree.' Not even neutron bombs would do; we'd need to turn the planet into a cinder like Cyan or Grey. Hell, that may even be what *happened* to Cyan and Grey! Even if you were prepared to kill that many people—and I'm not—what would it profit you?"

Dearborn sat back in the enormous leather chair and suppressed a yawn. "Is that your official position?"

"I no longer hold an official position," replied Whately. "I've retired from the U.N., and I intend to stay retired; I'm here at the request of your Pope."

Dearborn nodded. "Well, Monsignor, thanks for your input. It's been good to see you again; give my regards to World Blue."

Whately stood. "You're going to do it, aren't you?"

Dearborn stared at the Oval Office ceiling for a moment, then shrugged. "Yeah. If I don't, the Indigos will beat me to it; besides, we've spent billions just getting ready. The Bridges are built, the troops are trained, the logistics are all worked out, the news releases have been

written. . . . Hey, chill out! There's no need to worry." He grinned. "God is on *Our* side, remember?"

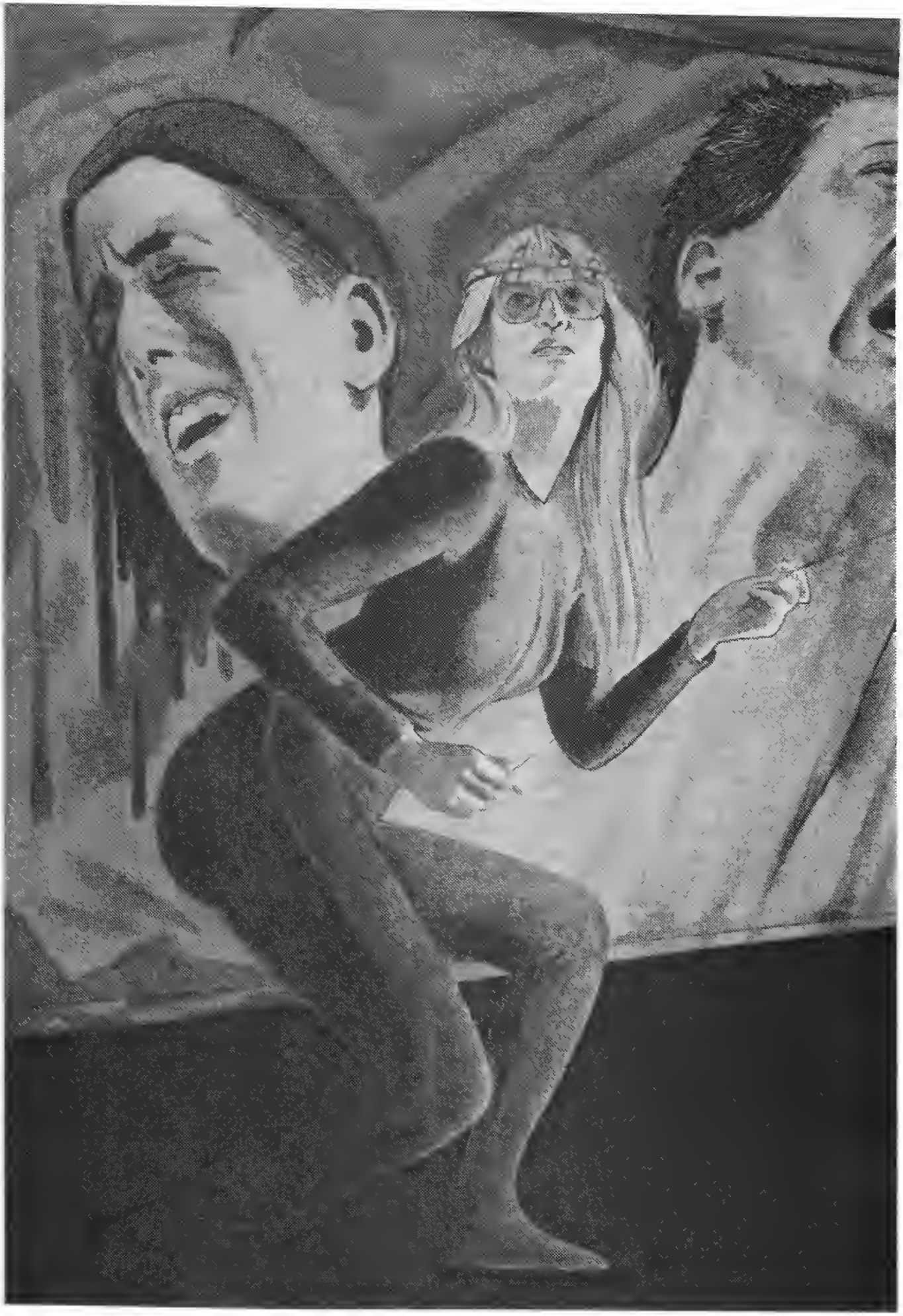
Three years later, when he caught his daughter giving Communion in the Lincoln Bedroom, it occurred to Dearborn that he might have been wrong. ●

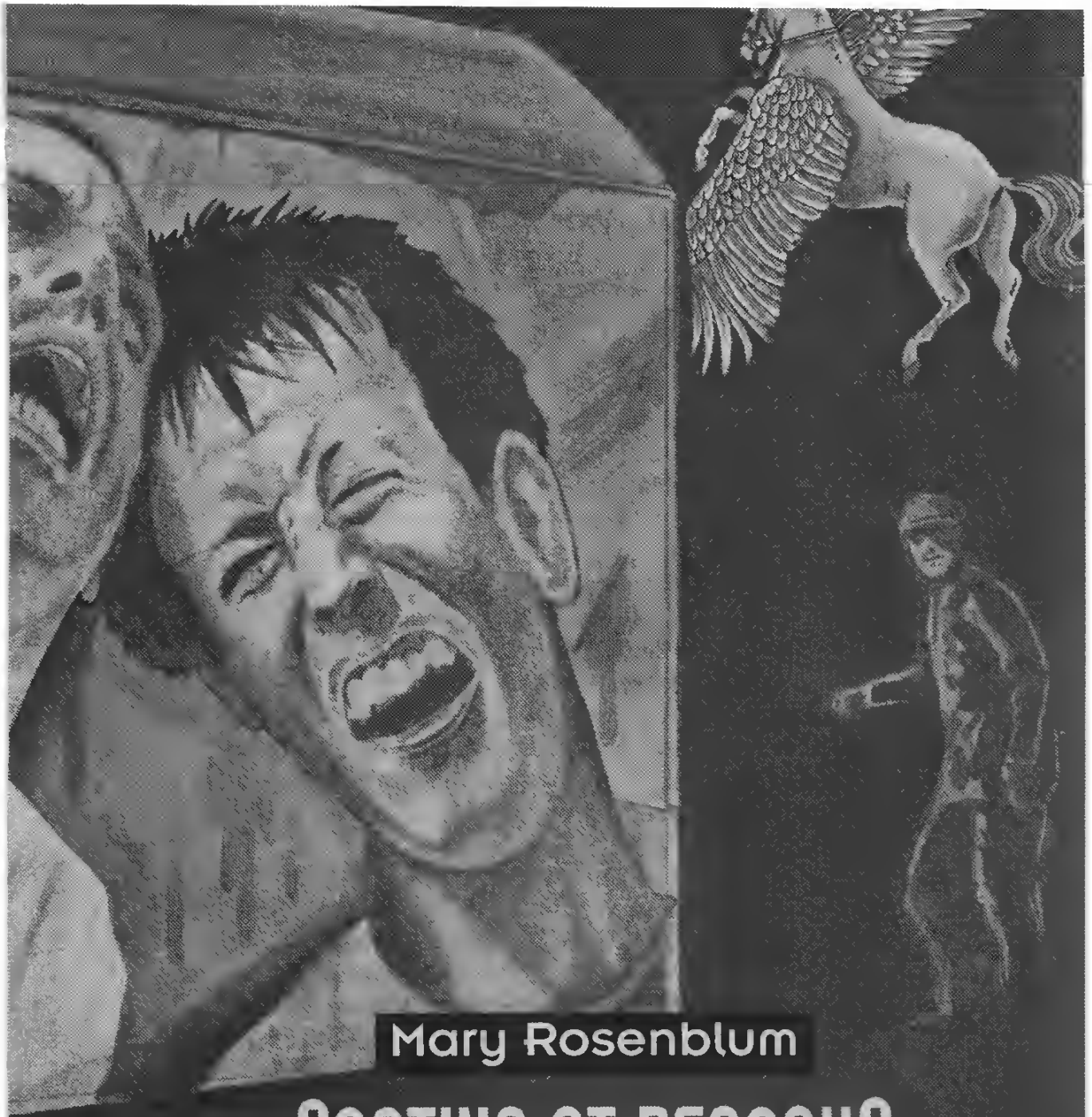
NEXT ISSUE

Next manth **Jack Dann,** one af the most acclaimed and respected writers of his generation, returns with our evocative and powerful May cover story, "Da Vinci Rising." In this complex and vivid novella, Dann takes us Sideways In Time to a fifteenth century Florence about to diverge sharply from our own time-line, and follows the young Leonardo da Vinci as, with all the arrogance of youth, he challenges the gods and makes a discovery no one thinks he can make, crafts an invention that na one believes can work, and, by so doing, sets all of future history down a completely different—and perhaps ominous—path.... Magazine appearances by Dann have, alas, become something of a rarity in recent years, as he works on various big mainstream projects, and *this* is Dann at his best—lyrical, compassionate, intense, mystical, compelling. Don't miss it!

ALSO IN MAY: Nebula-winner **Pat Murphy** gives us a wry look at the sometimes stern requirements you may have to meet in order to be accorded "A Place of Honor" in this life; **Jack McDevitt** takes us to a ravaged future world to meet the Caretaker of an Awesome Power, and to give us some feeling for the *price* of that responsibility, in the bittersweet "Ellie"; new writer **Kandis Elliot** returns with another in her popular series chranicling the strange adventures af Prafessar Farnsworth, this one a hair-raising adventure that brings the Professor face-to-tusk with some of the weirdest and most dangerous ichor-dripping monsters of pulp fiction, in "Sith Season"; new writer **Steve Martinez,** making a brilliant *Asimov's* debut, takes us to a very strange world where humans live an uneasy existence on the sufferance of some very strange aliens, and sends one of those hapless humans an a strange quest that takes him deep inta an only-partially understaad alien struggle for power and dominance, in the gripping "One Hand Clapping"; madcap new writer **Eliot Fintushel,** who made his debut here last year with the popular "Ylem," returns to shepherd us along through a dazzlingly strange future saciety for a fast-paced and bizarre encaunter with "The Beast with Two Backs"; and **Paul Hellweg** follows the implications of the Consumer Society to their ultimate conclusions, in the sly and razor-sharp "Pay As You Go." Plus, **Robert Silverberg's** "Reflections" column, and an array of other columns and features. Look for our May issue on sale on your newsstands on March 28, 1995.

COMING SOON: big new stories by **James Patrick Kelly, Nancy Kress, Howard Waldrop, Pamela Sargent, Ursula K. Le Guin, Brian Stableford, Harry Turtledove, Tanith Lee, Allen Steele, Geoffrey A. Landis, R. Garcia y Robertson, G. David Nordley, Brian W. Aldiss, John Brunner,** and many more.





Mary Rosenblum

CASTING AT PEGASUS

Mary Rosenblum's son Nate gets her thanks for this story. "It had been seriously stalled for some time, when he brought home a new CD by Soul Asylum. He wanted me to listen to the lyrics of one song, "Homesick," because they were important. They provided just the push needed to make this story work again." Ms. Rosenblum's most recent novel, *The Stone Garden*, was recently published by Del Rey. The author is currently working on a novel set in the same universe as "Selkies" (March 1994) and "The Mermaid's Comb" (June 1994).

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

It was a good night for flying. Windy enough to make her car buck. Stars and no moon, the riverbed a gouge of deeper darkness on her right. Therese braked, the highway empty behind her, nosed the little city-car into a tangle of fall-yellowed blackberries. Thorns scraped paint as she killed her headlights, and she didn't care.

It struck her suddenly how *much* she didn't care. Because Selva had originally paid for half of the car? She had never changed the registration. It was still in both their names. Therese squinted at darkness and rutted mud, angry at herself. For not thinking about the registration.

The car had been as easily cast off as Therese herself. How could she have forgotten to change the registration? Lips tight, Therese pulled clear up to the rusty chain-link fence, and turned off the engine. Opening the door let in the cold, and she shivered as she dragged her carryall from the cargo space. The wind combed invisible fingers, rich with fall scents of rotting leaves and cold moist earth, through her short hair. Yeah. Good night for flying.

She had told Selva about the airport, about sneaking out of her room at night when she was a kid, dressed in her "airport clothes." She used to cross the highway, cut through a field to the parking lot. Inside, she hung around in the waiting areas, drinking too-sweet hot chocolate from the snack bar, talking to other passengers, telling them how she was on her way to live with her father in Paris, or Amsterdam, or New York. "You did your single-parent angst more creatively than most," Selva had said. And she had laughed and rumpled Therese's hair. "That's why you're such a wonderful artist."

She didn't think so anymore. Therese hooked her fingers through the scabby fabric of the decrepit chain-link fence. The mesh shivered with a soft metallic clash as she climbed. Like a sigh, Therese thought. She threw one leg over the top, where she'd cut the barbed wire. A sigh of rust and aging and abandonment. Could a fence feel abandoned?

She swung her other leg over, leaped down to land with a splat in hummocky dew-wet grass. Another world, in here. She looked skyward, remembering airplanes taking off like constellations of colored stars rising from the tangled strings of blue lights that edged the runways. *Hi. Where are you going? I'm on my way to Paris. My dad's there and he wants me to come live with him. He's a correspondent for the New York* Times. . . . Therese hefted her carryall higher on her shoulder, began to jog toward the asphalt runway. The broken stems of old landing-lights stuck up like mileposts along the runway. Who had broken them off, and why? Now, people came and went at the big shuttle terminal, arcing up to the Platforms and down again. Or they did the Net. God bless the Net. Which brought her back to Selva, and Selva didn't belong here.

Therese slowed to a walk, forcing herself to listen. The empty airport

had its own population—the boarders who skimmed the runways, the taggers, and the night watchman, who took his break now, between midnight and one. No sound of board wheels. The taggers kept to the blank canvases of the buildings. On a whim, she decided to set up out beyond the old hangar, out past the gate area. It might take the watchman half the night to notice her lights if she were lucky.

That was part of it—how long the flight lasted before the night watchman cut it down.

With a roar of sound, a pod of boarders zoomed up out of the darkness; three of them, dressed in black, slaloming back and forth across the cracked asphalt. Their boards' jet engines screamed, unmuffled and mocking. Therese dodged into the tall grass along the runway and dropped flat. Frost-killed stems brushed her cheeks, wet her face with dew like cold tears as they zoomed past. The night watchman would chase them. He always did. *Thanks, guys,* she mouthed silently, bounced to her feet, and broke into a run across the gate area. Big halides mounted on the terminal buildings splashed light across the asphalt, glinting on faded traffic markings. She avoided the light, cut across the grass again, shoes and socks soaked through now. Her feet slapped the concrete apron of the old hangar.

Quick. She unzipped her carryall, grabbed the tether-stakes she'd made from plastic pipe. Pounded the first one into the soggy ground beyond the apron. Wind from the east. She tested it with a hand, guessed twenty-five with gusts to thirty-five. Exactly the conditions she'd plugged into her virtual simulation, so the lights should go up slick and fast. She pounded in the second and third stakes and fumbled in her bag. Working in the dark because light brought the night watchman that much sooner, she snagged the first string. High-tensile line, black. The fiberlight beading felt like thin plastic twine beneath her fingers, flexible, cool, invisible in the darkness. She wound the end of the string around the first stake, laid it out. Laid out the second string and straightened the crossties by touch. So far, so good. If she tangled it now, she could kiss this night's flight good-bye.

Sound in the darkness, over by the unlighted hangar. Therese straightened, adrenaline spiking through her. The night watchman carried a taser, and the boarders carried blades. She slipped a hand into her pocket, closed her fingers around her small cannister of mace, listening until her ears buzzed, turning the rush of wind into sneaking footsteps, the snap of an opening blade.

Nothing. Hands wanting to shake, she unfolded the kite, bent the slender wands into the pockets she'd bonded into the corners. The wind caught at the transparent plastic so that it billowed out and came alive

in her hands, straining like a dog tugging at a leash, full of promise, full of potential.

Potential. She hated the word. Selva had used it a lot at the end—"Your stuff has so much potential." Then came the "buts . . ." But the art market is such a closed place. But it's so tough to make your living doing art. But, but, but . . .

But get real and get a job, honey.

With an angry shake of her head and a leap, Therese tossed the kite into the air. The wind caught it, snatched it skyward, burning the line through her fingers. She paid it out carefully, steadily, squinting as her light-lines rose, intertangled like an invisible net spread to catch the stars. It looked okay, just like her sim. She anchored the kite-line to the third stake, and pulled the remote from her other pocket, heart beating fast now, because she didn't know, couldn't know how it would really look, until . . . *now*. Her forefinger touched the button.

And her light-net came to life, spilling meshes of liquid fire across the night. The hair-fine fiberlight threads, bought from a tattoo artist wholesale, glowed in jewel-bright color against the sky. Ruby. Neon blue. Sun-gold. Tonight, she had captured the great square of Pegasus, twined him in shimmering helices of light as the invisible kite danced with the wind, and the tangled threads glowed. Winged steed, lifting to a world behind those stars. Tonight she had harnessed him. She felt him tugging, the energy of those huge shoulders thrumming down the lines. Therese closed her eyes, let the energy hum through her flesh. In a moment, he would lift her from the ground, that harnessed creature, and carry her . . .

"Hey."

Soft voice, a breath almost, surely too low to be heard over the wind. Therese spun around, poised to run. Light by the hangar, a flash's glow that illuminated a tawny, androgynous kid's face. Spiky brown hair. Tilted, dark eyes.

"Beat it." Same soft, urgent carrying tone. "The cop's comin'." The light winked out.

She heard him now—heavy footsteps thudding on the grass. She snatched up her carryall and ran. Behind her, a shout. Light. She glanced over her shoulder, caught a glimpse of a tall man-shape, bulky in a uniform coverall, flash beam swinging like a sword to chop her. The night watchman; Frankenstein of this dark abandoned place, the Boogeyman. What was the range of his taser-dart? The light stabbed at her and she ran faster. The fence loomed out of the night.

Therese leaped, fingers hooking in the mesh, climbing, hiking her crotch over the rusty barbs of the top strands, deft, graceful, made so by fight-flight chemistry. She splashed down in cold, puddled water. She

ran a few steps. Stopped and turned. He stood on the far side of the fence, a shadow, saying nothing.

He never chased her beyond the fence. He never called the cops. Therese watched him turn and vanish back into the darkness. In the distance, her jewel-fire net danced against the sky, tethering Pegasus. Therese watched it, counting the minutes in her head, a clench of yearning in her chest. Because when those strings were cut, Pegasus would fly free. Without her. The distant strands of color sagged suddenly. Crumpled, twisted and crashed in glittering ruin to the ground. Therese touched the remote, warm in her pocket.

The lights vanished.

Behind her, a sigh.

The kid? "Thank you." Therese peered into the darkness, couldn't see a thing. "He might have caught me, tonight." No answer, but she could feel a presence, like an eddy in the perfect, windy darkness, a spiral knot of energy. "Good night," Therese said, and trudged up the embankment to the main road.

Her feet were cold now, the chill penetrating to the bone. The elation was gone, leaving her with a hangover of emptiness, and she wondered who the kid was as she trudged along the pavement. A boarder? She hadn't seen a board. A tagger, scrawling his rude splash of identity across the hangar wall? And what are *you* doing, if not just that?

She'd felt Pegasus tugging at the strands of the lights. Like those planes had tugged at her as they lifted from the blue-lighted lanes of the runways. One day she would let go and . . . fly with him.

To *where?* A tiny voice whispered in her head. To somewhere, Therese told herself. She'd know when she got there. Her shoes squished the predawn quiet. Overhead, a shooting star streaked across the spangled sky, east to west, vanishing into the city glow. A message from the gods? She wished she could read it.

The apartment lights didn't come on when she opened the door. Cheap hardware. She slapped the manual switch, blinked in the harsh fluorescent glare, and stumbled over the package that had been set just inside the door. With a stifled yelp, she caught herself on the back of the futon sofa, anger flushing through her, making her cheeks burn.

The landlord again, with his damned pass key. Being nice? She didn't *want* him to be nice if it meant opening her door. He was probably snooping for drugs or illegal hardware. Therese scooped the package up and prowled the single big room, neck prickling like a dog with its hackles raised, looking for any signs he'd poked around. Inside the box, something shifted; mass packed not-quite-solidly. Therese turned it over and looked at the label. Vancouver, BC, return address.

Selva.

Why now, after all these months of silence?

She set it on the kitchen counter, stared at it. Presents were never really gifts. They were messages or obligations or both. Send it back, she told herself, but she was already reaching for a knife to saw through the packing tape. Inside, color peeked from foam packaging—a flash of rich crimson and gold that caught the ugly light, flung it back with gem-sparkle warmth. She dug into the white beads, a part of her mind noticing that it had been professionally packed, money thrown away to convenience—she'd never been that rich.

Her fingertips touched slick cool . . . glass.

She lifted it out. A fountain of crystal ice, turned static in a skyward splash, it glittered with streaks of ruby and embedded flakes of gold. The artist had filled that crystallized silicon with life, so that you saw more than this frozen instant, you saw the molten glass leap skyward, scattering into gem-bright droplets, falling back to earth all in an instant.

Beautiful, with no apology offered to function. Like her light-nets. Therese looked around her room. Futon sofa, low table in front of it, both salvation-army crummy. The silent pile of electronic hardware that was the only thing that really mattered. She set the glass down on the table. It gave the room a feel of . . . failure. Loser turf. And she wondered suddenly if Selva had *meant* that piece of glass to have exactly this effect, if she was that subtle and vengeful.

You're hungry, Therese told herself, and that was certainly so. She turned her back on the sculpture, grabbed a stale bagel from the bag on top of the microwave.

You have a call, her House system intoned. *From Selva Portofino-Harris.*

Selva? Therese laid the untouched bagel down, mouth open to refuse the call. The glass caught her eye, made her momentarily breathless with its beauty. "I . . .okay." She fumbled for her gloves and goggles, clumsy suddenly, always clumsy around Selva's deft competence. "House, take the call."

Gloves on, she pulled the virtual goggles down over her forehead, plastic edges scraping softly across her skin. And found herself on a polished wood floor. Huge windows offered green lawns and distant white columns like Greek ruins. Sun, lovely sleek furniture. Selva Portofino-Harris leaned one bony hip against a polished slab of teak desktop that matched the color of her perfect shoulders.

She lifted weights in the flesh, wore her muscles proudly in virtual, her dark, Brazilian skin accented by a simple white tank-top and shorts.

Therese turned her face away, struggling suddenly with a hard lump

in her throat. "Well." Inane word. Say something, or say nothing and get the hell out. "I got your . . . present. Just now."

"I . . . don't know why I sent it to you. I guess . . . it made me think of you."

The tone was wrong for vengeance, or even anger. Therese looked, in spite of herself. Yearning on that strong, almost harsh face? You could wear any mask you wanted in virtual. It didn't have to be real. . . . "It makes my apartment look like shit." She wasn't wearing her skinthins, only gloves and goggles, so all Selva was seeing was a rather boring simulation. A two-dee icon with no emotional cues. She took a deep breath, feeling slightly more in control. "So thanks." Which would cue a nice smile. "That was sweet of you to send it."

"Which translates to 'fuck off.' " Selva's smile bared her teeth. "Not yet, girl. How's your stuff doing?" She planted both palms on the desktop, swung her butt between them, like she did when she was upset. "Any new sales?"

"No." To *hell* with cool. Therese crossed her arms, wishing she *had* put on skins, go ahead and see how pissed I am. . . . "Barrain tossed me out of the gallery. I wasn't selling enough. Hey, like you said—" she flung the words like stones, "Stationary holoture isn't hot. Virtual interactives are all the thing, now."

"I never said . . " Selva closed her eyes briefly. "I'm sorry about the gallery slot. So what are you doing?"

"You mean to pay the rent? I'm doing virtual recordings." She had to look away again, even though it didn't matter because Selva wasn't really seeing her expression. "Cityscapes, countryside—buy a park permit, splash around in a couple of waterfalls, and someone will buy it." She'd recorded for herself, once. For her holoture work. "Hey, the VR artists can at least pay good money." Laugh. "A midnight walk under the full moon is good for a week's worth of rent." Another wasted shrug. "I already had most of the hardware."

"You could work for Xavier," Selva said quietly. "He's always got room for another talented designer."

"Designing advertising riffs? Or fancy offices for bored Net execs?"

"Sorry." Selva flushed. "I forgot, you're an *artist.*"

"No, I'm a camera." It came out too soft for effect. "Listen, it's late and I've got to go to bed."

"Where were you?" Selva stopped swinging, stood straight and still in front of her skin-toned wooden desk. "Out at the airport again? Flying your kites?"

Flying your kites? "Go to hell. House . . . "

"Don't you exit on me!" Selva's voice cracked like a whip. "You never would share that with me—your airport stuff. I think that's part of why

I could move up here without you. Because you wouldn't let me in on it at all. I guess it sent me a message."

And what message had *she* sent back in that piece of beautiful glass? "I asked you to come along. You were too busy."

"I was."

Therese's anger lost its razor edge because Selva had looked away, and she *never* did that. It made her look vulnerable.

Selva was never vulnerable.

"Hey." She filled in the silence with words, not wanting to see that unexpected curve of neck with its exposed groove of jugular vein and carotid. "Any time you want to see, just hop a shuttle. I'll be glad to show you." Would she? Therese wondered suddenly. Take Selva out to the airport? It would mean . . . what it might or might not mean didn't matter, because Selva was shaking her head anyway.

"I can't. Not right now, anyway. We're using stationary equipment to do some high-end decorating for Boise-Quebec's new offices. And we've got this deadline. So I can't work remote through a set of skins."

"I didn't think so. Look, it's late. I'm yawning, even if you can't see it. Time for bed."

"Yeah." Selva wasn't looking vulnerable any more. "I'll see you," she said. Coolly. Virtually. And was gone.

Banished from this electronic room, this reality, because she wasn't real any more. The room squeezed her—stranger's room, stranger's futon and shitty little table. Stranger's life. The glass sculpture announced it in shards of crystalline light. She grabbed it, raised it over her head, muscles hard with anticipation of the coming smash.

It was its own frozen instant of beauty, never mind Selva, never mind the message it carried. She set it down very gently, snagged her jacket from the sofa, and slammed the door on the way out.

The riverside highway looked different in the gray dawn light. Mist rose from the water, pooling white and thick in the sloughs. Tree branches thrust up through it, their twigs stiff and cold, trailing the last yellowed rags of summer leaves. She missed her hidden turnoff entirely, tricked by the daylight topography of the berry thickets. Didn't matter. She hadn't planned to park there anyway, it wasn't safe during the day. Some satellite traffic-eye might spot her, bust her for trespass. The terminal buildings looked so drab, off in the distance. The main entrance was on the far side of the complex, barricaded and lighted. Protected. From here, the gate aprons looked stained and forlorn, drifted with rotting leaves and soggy trash.

Last night, she had trapped Pegasus in a net of jewels. In the bright light of sunrise, the place looked drab—a dead end, without magic or

future. Beyond the fence, the old hangar slumped in the cold morning mist. No sign of her light-net, of course. Probably trashcanned by the boogeyman night watchman. She braked hard and suddenly, pulled off onto the shoulder.

She'd looked at it a hundred times: tagger art. Ego, hormones, desperation, and anger, sprayed bright and immediate across any vertical surface. But the tag on the hangar doors was . . . different. Faces stared upward, surreal and huge. Their neon eyes were terrible—bright with hope and yearning that seared her, made her hands tremble on the wheel. Their enormous mouths opened, whispering, not shouting, calling softly, like you'd call your lover to bed.

Calling who? Therese climbed out of the car, shivering in the dank morning chill. She wanted to know who . . .

A tiny sound made her turn her head—nothing more than a rustle in the dew-spangled thistles that edged that asphalt. He was sitting there, screened by the weeds; the kid from last night. Asian skin, African lips, hazel eyes. Face too broad, chin too long. He was ugly, as if his genes warred, like the races that had donated them. He was watching her, head tilted, shadow pooling beneath those stark cheekbones.

"Hey." He grinned.

"Hey." Fourteen, Therese guessed. "Your tag?" She nodded at the distant hangar.

"Uh huh. The geek hasn't painted it out yet. He's weird—waits till I finish 'em, at least. This one's gonna be the last." Triumph in those words, not defeat.

"Why the last?" She looked again, her eyes drawn to the sky by those yearning, calling faces.

"They're gonna *come* for me." He stood, lazy and laidback. "They hang around here, up high, where you can't see 'em. Only once in a while, you know? Maybe they're everywhere, or maybe there's some kind of hole here, like the hole in the ozone that everybody figured was gonna wipe us out? I'm one of them." His grin mocked her, challenging her, so that Therese wasn't sure if he was shitting her or not. "I figured that out when I finally realized that everybody *else* on this fucking planet is an alien. I don't belong here. I got left behind or lost or something." He tilted his head, still grinning, still challenging. "I'm Jazz. You gonna do some more lights tonight?"

"Therese." No, he wasn't shitting her. Above that grin, his eyes were the eyes of the faces on the wall, full of that same terrible, loving, yearning cry. "I might fly tonight," she said. "If the wind's right."

"It'll be better with the two of us. Your lights say the same thing, so I figure you're one, too. See you around." And then he took off running

through the weeds, leaping tangled clumps of thistle like a deer. A scraggly clump of hawthorn swallowed him, and the verge was empty again, silent except for the dead weed stems rattling in the breeze. Therese shaded her eyes to stare at the mural one more time.

Those faces drew her eyes skyward again, clenched her chest with that yearning. Like last night, when Pegasus had tugged at her light-net. *I don't belong here.* Jazz's voice came back to her. Yeah, she thought bitterly. Me neither. You're right.

A tall figure, wide-shouldered and dressed in a dull green coverall, strolled across the concrete apron. The night watchman? A watchman, Therese told herself. This would be a different shift, surely. For an awful moment, she thought he was on his way to Jazz's mural, to paint it out or deface it somehow, to choke that rending cry.

As a kid, this place had been a magic doorway to a bright future, a future as colorful and full of promise as the bustle and light of the airport concourse. It had been more real than the faded silent mother who lived in her own universe of work and fatigue and TV, and the dark warehouse of the public school system. In the grip of the grim days, she'd thought about the airport and had been . . . homesick.

That's it, Jazz, she thought and laughed out loud. We're homesick for a world that doesn't even exist. Maybe it *would* take aliens to bring you there!

Therese turned away, climbed back up onto the asphalt, tired now, her feet wet again. She tapped her code into the door, opened it, and slid onto the cold plastic seat.

Therese Marie Oberti? Her cheap dashboard speaker squawked at her. *Will you please insert your ID card in the ignition slot?*

Uh-oh. Cold sweat prickled beneath her armpits as she fumbled her card into the ignition.

Your vehicle was reported as parked in a state no-trespass zone at one-fourteen-AM this morning. Your ID card was last used to access the ignition, and since you did not report the card stolen within six hours, the violation has been charged to you. Your file came up before state circuit court at eight-twenty-three this morning, and you were found guilty by the operating judicial program. Your fine, three thousand one hundred and thirty dollars, has been charged directly to your account. If you wish to contest the verdict, you must file an appeal and meet the accompanying fee by eight-twenty-three tomorrow morning. If you have any questions, please access legal assistance through your Net account.

The tinny voice ended.

A ticket. Therese stared numbly at the blue plastic dash. It was cracking in places, dried-out and damaged by sun and heat. She traced a long split, the curled-back edges of the cheap plastic sharp beneath her

fingertip. A three thousand dollar state trespass ticket. . . . It was intended to discourage looters. Who had reported her car while it was parked here? The night watchman, of course. Therese closed her hand into a fist, nails biting into her palm. No wonder he didn't waste his precious breath chasing her beyond the nice safe fence. It was so much easier to sneak around until he found her car and could turn her in.

Well, she *had* been trespassing.

He had violated something, though, sullied that perfect flight last night. "Bastard," she said, very softly. Three thousand would clean out her savings. She wasn't going to be able to make rent this month. Not after she paid for the Net time she used to create holoture nobody wanted. Numbly, she tapped the engine to life, pulled a tight U on the empty asphalt. Go home, she told herself. Take a hot shower. Eat some breakfast. And then get your recording gear out and go find some neat imagery to sell to the Xaviers of the world. Auction off a few bits of your reality for someone else to use.

The sun was up, spearing her with dazzling light, striking the last glints of gold and yellow from the fall leaves. Eyes watering from the sun—not from tears, definitely *not* tears—she drove home, obeying every damn traffic law in the books.

You have two messages, her House system murmured as she let herself in. It turned on the lights, too, never mind that it was broad daylight.

Therese sighed and hit the manual switch, clicking them off. "House, messages." She pulled on her goggles and gloves.

"Ms. Oberti." The landlord's voice emerged from a shifting matrix of color, because he only paid for voice access. "Just a little reminder that yesterday was the first of the month. I need to have the rent by Wednesday."

"Endit." She glowered as the color winked out. Bilious yellow. How appropriate. Last time she'd been short, she'd been able to stall him for more than a week. It wasn't like people were standing in line to rent this dump, but maybe . . . somebody was.

She smoothed a wrinkle from her glove, running down her list of clients. Most of them wanted fancy landscape takes; the beach in a storm, snow on the desert, that kind of thing. She didn't even have the money for a park entry permit, never mind the time to wait for interesting weather. She could sell her skins. They were a custom job with all the high-end recording hardware you needed. Without them, she'd have to buy somebody else's reality. Like Xavier did. And she'd never be able to afford another set this good.

That wasn't it. She'd never be optimistic enough about her career to risk that kind of money again. "House, next message," she snapped.

" 'Rese?" Selva materialized, shimmering like airport fog. "Call me please? Realtime?"

She sounded worried, and Selva never worried because she had it *all* under control. "Message Selva Portofino-Harris." The words popped out on their own, spurred by fear.

Fear for Selva—and she had no right to be afraid for her. Not any more. Therese opened her mouth to cancel, but Selva's face was already shimmering into being, as if she'd been waiting for the call.

" 'Rese?" That hint of worry still showed. "How are you?"

"Fine." Big lie. "I'm just returning your call."

"Look, I was talking to Xavier just a little bit ago. And I mentioned your light-net stuff. He got pretty excited. He thinks we can use it. He was interested enough to offer a pretty good option."

She'd told Xavier about her flights. . . . "What's he going to use it *for?*" Therese didn't try to keep the bitterness out of her voice. "An ad for booze? Virtual sex hardware? The latest genened oranges?"

"What does it matter?" Selva refused to get pissed. "Xavier's just optioning the raw imagery anyway. You won't even recognize the final cut. And he pays *well*. Once you're on his string, you're in. And we use a lot of material. Are you interested?"

She wasn't angry, simply felt . . . numb. "You want to buy one of my flights." The flights you wouldn't share.

"Yeah." Selva's smile was wary. "If you don't want me to look at it, I won't. I'll just turn it over to Xavier."

"And what if he tells you to work with it?" Flat voice, still so calm.

"Well . . ." Wrinkled nose, grimace. "I'll have to, yeah. But there's no reason it'd show up in one of my projects." She reached, laid a virtual hand on Therese's arm. "Does it really bother you so much? I'd really like to come watch if you'd let me. I just can't do it when you snap your fingers."

"I didn't snap my fingers. I asked." Therese looked down at her arm. Her eyes gave her Selva's long, slender fingers curving across her forearm. She felt nothing. Without skins, this was a ghost-touch, maybe would have been a ghost-touch if Selva was standing here in the flesh.

Which she wasn't.

"Money." She laughed softly, bitterly. "I sure need it." So she got to choose, sell her soul or her skins. . . . "Hey, why not?" The words tasted bitter on her tongue. "I'll sell Xavier his flight. You can watch it if you want. I don't care."

"I won't look at it." Selva's face was dark and still, like a pool at twilight when you couldn't see the bottom. "What do they mean to you?" she asked. "Your light-nets?"

For a moment words pressed at the back of her throat. *I rode Pegasus home. Almost.*

Almost wasn't good enough. She'd learned that as an artist. She swallowed, and the words were gone. "You gotta be there," she said softly.

"I *would* be. If you'd let me." Selva's eyes flashed, but she kept her temper under control. "Sometimes I think you do your lights because they *aren't* real. You can hang out at that nice safe airport and you don't have to care. Oh they're flesh and not virtual, that's not what I mean. Coming up to Vancouver is real. Working for Xavier and doing your art anyway is real. I think you're afraid of *real,* Therese. Do you know how much it hurt me when you stayed behind? Do you know how much I *love* you? Or do you care?"

No! Therese struggled for the words she had swallowed, but they wouldn't come back. *I didn't know. You never told me.* "Yeah, I care." She turned away, pulled her goggles off. "I care a lot."

But her goggles were off and that signaled her system to shut off the connect. So probably Selva hadn't heard that last.

Which was a good thing, maybe. Because it didn't matter at all.

"You want to buy my next flight?" she whispered. "Fine." She reached for the tumbled pile of her skinthins. "I'll give it to you, and you can give it to Xavier, and he can pay me for it." She laughed, a single note that hurt her throat like a sob.

Hey, why not?

Her skins itched. She scratched, one hand on the wheel because there wasn't any traffic on the airport road this time of night. Full recording gear meant skins, gloves, hood, the works. Patch on the left eyelid to the synch micro-cameras on her headband to her eye-track. She'd get it all—every twitch of body language that put you into the scene, register the physical tensions of fight-flight surprise, ambivalence, joy. All for you, baby. All for your boss.

Selva would be *there* at the airport.

Whose reality? *You're afraid. . . .* Selva's voice whispered in her ear. *Afraid. . .*

Therese braked hard, almost missed the turn. The car lurched and bucked, going too fast for the rutted track, and she clung to the wheel as thorns put new scratches in the paint. Nobody here except her. The engine stalled and died, and she pushed the door open. Frosty night air. The east wind was blowing, flowing down the Gorge like an invisible river of ice-cold water. It tugged at the black stocking cap she wore, flicked tendrils of hair into her eyes, and pried chilly fingers down her neck.

Good night for flying, Selva. She touched her eyelid to make sure the

tracking patch was in place, tapped the control at her waist. Recording. The tiny telltale winked green. Therese leaped, fingers hooking into the softly clashing chain link, scrambled over, and dropped. The grass wasn't wet tonight. An east wind had dried out the ground with its cold breath. Rags of thin cloud briefly obscured the sliver of moon. Do you see it, Selva? You can't feel the wind, but you'll feel me shiver, feel the subtle shifts as I push against it.

This is reality. Not the Net. Not pleasant virtual conversations in an unreal living room made up of electrons and fantasy.

This.

So who was she trying to convince? Scanning the landscape, the broken stumps of lights, she walked slowly along the abandoned runway. Planes used to land in sweeps of light, touching down between chains of blue jewels. Coming to get her, coming to take her home, only she'd never gone. The wind teased her, kissing her neck with cold lips. She could fly from this spot, but she kept on going, blaming the boarders that might show any time.

A lie. She was going to fly from the hangar, in front of Jazz's yearning faces. No other place would work, and she didn't stop to examine the reason for that. The gate apron glimmered like a gray wasteland in the faint moonlight. She skirted it, an eye out for the night watchman's flash. No sign of him. She never saw him between midnight and one. She'd long ago figured that for his break. For a while, she had wondered why he hadn't realized that she always set up during that hour. If he really wanted to catch her, he could do it just by changing his routines. She'd thought he was dumb at first. Then she'd decided that maybe he didn't really *want* to catch her.

Only he'd reported her car. So, maybe she'd been wrong. The hangar loomed ahead, concrete apron veined with grass-grown cracks. Too rough for the boarders. Therese dropped her carryall in the long grass beyond the apron, got out her stakes. One. Two. Hammerstrokes jarred the plastic spikes into the soil, every blow recorded in muscle action and reaction. Therese finished pounding the third stake in, and flung the hammer aside, not needing it anymore. She realized then—that this was the last time. The last flight.

Never again, because once something broke, you couldn't put it back together again. When she downloaded this night's recording into Selva's filespace, the airport, whatever it meant, whatever it was, would be broken. Lips pressed against tears that didn't come, she began to lay out the precise tangles of her light-net. Her skins recorded what she saw, stored it in hard-memory in her belt-pack, then beamed it home to her system, bouncing the digitized kaleidoscope of light and shadow and movement off the face of some battered satellite. From Earth to space to

Earth again. The wind caught her kite as she unfurled it. Feel it, Selva? How it pulls at my arms? You can't smell the scent of fall and eastern desert in the wind, you can't feel the echoes of this place, of Pegasus spreading his invisible wings overhead.

She had never walked through the airport gates, gotten onto a plane, and gone into those beautiful futures. Last night, she had let Pegasus go. On the wall, Jazz's faces yearned silently for a home that wasn't here. The east wind snatched at the kite, rough and importunate, full of rude force. She tossed it into the sky, and a gust snatched meters of line through her fingers, lofting it high, higher. She reached the end of the line, let go. It snapped tight, thrumming with strain as the wind gusted again. Perhaps life was nothing but departures—from the darkness of the womb, from the dark and light of life—only departing, never arriving. Hand in her pocket, finger just caressing the remote button, she walked over to the hangar.

"So, turn it on." Jazz's voice from the darkness didn't startle her tonight. "C'mon, tonight's the night." Excitement hummed in his words. "Turn it on."

Tonight's the night. His belief infected her. Sometimes—as a kid in the airport late at night, when exhaustion blurred the line between fantasy and reality—for a few brief minutes her plane *was* landing, and she waited for the stewardess to open her little desk beside the ramp, to announce the row numbers that were boarding first. Sometimes she had stood in line to board, her blood thrumming with the anticipation of takeoff, the lights below, the black starry sky a ceiling to forever. . . .

If she had walked up to that desk, would the stewardess have smiled, welcomed her? "Okay," she whispered, and thumbed the control. Above them, *light;* twisting, shimmering beneath the stars, jewel-bright in strands and twists, tangled like DNA, or love, or the trailing hair of God, charged with the invisible pulse of the wind.

He was right—it was the same cry as the people on the hangar door, written in glyphs of light and wind and the perfect night. *We are homesick. Please take us home.* . . . Shoulder touching shoulder, Therese and Jazz searched the sky. They would come. How could they *not* come?

Boots scraped on concrete.

"Fuck," Jazz breathed. "Not *now*. Not yet!"

Therese looked over her shoulder. The night watchman stood on the edge of the concrete apron, a shadowy form in a dark uniform coverall, bulky and ominous.

Jazz hesitated, agony in the twist of his shoulders. "It's the camps for me, if I get busted again," he hissed. "Oh, *fuck!*" And ran.

It had shattered into ruin, they wouldn't hear, they wouldn't come. Reality crashed in like a wave—fines, money. And Therese leapt after

Jazz, her own heart hammering with boogeyman dread and real fear. Wrong way, a sane corner of her brain shrieked at her. Double back, cut past him, and you can get over the fence.

But Jazz raced on ahead of her, a moving shadow in the dark, drawing her after him. If he was caught, he'd go to an adult detention camp. His fear infected her, lashed her with adrenaline. Fear for him, for her. His aliens wouldn't find him in a camp. They wouldn't know to look for him there, and he'd know it. That he'd never go home. And he'd die. Concrete jarred her as she reached the gate-apron.

She risked a glance over her shoulder, saw the night watchman emerge from darkness onto the gray glimmer of the concrete, running slowly, heavily. What was the range of his stunner? An ancient set of wheeled stairs leaned against the face of the terminal, the kind that had been pushed up against small commuter planes for passengers to climb. Jazz was up it in a flash, balancing on the top, reaching for the sill of the huge dark windows just above him.

Therese followed him, afraid to look back and see if the night watchman was behind her, afraid she'd tear her skins on the rusty metal. Above, the glass had been broken out of the huge windows. Moonlight glinted on triangular fragments sticking up like razor teeth. Therese grabbed a bare stretch of sill, levered herself over. Torn skins would be worse than a sliced hide. She could heal. The skins wouldn't. "Jazz?" No answer. "Where *are* you?"

Moonlight turned shadow into memory, picked out a patch of blue and red carpet, a flash of chrome from a chair. Therese halted, the watchman forgotten, fumbled for the flash in her pocket. Light speared out, touching naked girders and trailing cables like ripped-out guts or vines, fallen squares of tattered and smoke-stained acoustic tile. She shivered.

The blue and red carpet, the plastic and chrome furniture, had looked so new and beautiful, a promise made of a future connected by those landing planes to that long-ago today. People had looked at her and had smiled, knowing that she was one of them, with somewhere to go, someone to welcome her.

Such a silly game to play. The flash beam trembled in her hand, making the shadowy space stutter in light and shadow.

Glass tinkled behind her. The sound scattered memory, galvanized her into a run. Glass crunched beneath her feet, and she smelled the sour stink of old dead fire. She swung her flash, motes of dust twinkling in the beam, turning it into a hazy sword of light. Her light-sword kissed denim blue, black shirt. Jazz. She kept it on him as she ran, tethered to him by light. Random heaps took shape and vanished at the edges of vision; chairs, wrecked furniture, piles of fallen ceiling tile. Electric-cable guts. Cobwebs. Jazz ducked right, and she followed him down a wide

corridor. A rumpled abandoned sleeping bag looked like a body, brought her heart briefly into her throat. Jazz veered again, through a huge archway this time, out into the cavernous center of the terminal. The vast space stretched away into darkness. Here and there, trash, dead leaves, and debris shoaled against ticket counters or in the corners of empty waiting areas.

The floor quivered beneath Therese's feet. She froze, adrenaline washing through her like ice water. Cautiously, she bounced up and down.

The floor bounced with her.

Which meant what? That they could fall through? "Jazz?" She hissed his name, but he was already half way across the space, heading for the old front doors.

Therese started after him, afraid to yell and bring the night watchman after them. On her left, carpeting hung in frayed tatters into a hole in the floor. The flashlight's weakening beam reflected off glossy char, showed her fallen burned timbers. So. A fire had gutted the lower level. How much of the floor was ready to crumble? "Jazz!" This time she *did* yell. "Jazz, stop! The floor!"

As if her words had cued it, the floor sagged beneath his feet, rotted carpet stretching, tearing with a dry, ripping sound. Dust rose in a cloud, and, arms flung wide, Jazz sank into it, disappearing downward in terrible slow motion. Therese lunged, hands reaching, grabbed for him, and felt the floor sag beneath her. Carpet tore with a dry ripping sound, and she screamed, falling. Carpeting disintegrated between her clutching fingers, and she screamed again, vision full of darkness, lungs full of pungent, dank char-reek, imagining concrete below, nails and fallen beams, spears to pierce her. Hardness slammed her ribs, and a terrible weight crashed down across her back, slammed the breath from her lungs in a red blaze of hurt. She struggled to breathe, the flash tumbling downward, beam slashing the darkness.

A little air seeped into her aching lungs, easing the panic. Slowly, she began to sort out the hurting; beam beneath her, pressing hard into chest, thighs, shoulder, Jazz lying half across her, crushing her ribcage, his muscles iron hard as he panted in her ear. The flashlight was still on—small miracle. Dust hazed the slender beam. It was a *long* way down.

"Fuck," Jazz whispered. And moved.

"Stop!" Therese clutched the beam as they tilted sideways, struggling for balance. "Stay *still.*"

"Okay." Explosion of breath in her ear. "All right!"

How do you get out of *this* little situation, Therese Oberti? Easy enough. Let *go.* She giggled.

"What so funny?" Jazz snarled. Scared.

"Gravity." She peered cautiously sideways. "You could maybe climb onto those beams."

"Uh-uh. Too far. Down I can maybe handle." Jazz sucked in a deep breath. "Hang on, okay?"

Light splashed them from above, searingly bright. "Nice going." A male voice, disgusted. "You guys really blew it. Hang on, and I'll see if I can find something you can grab." The light beam shifted, and Therese glimpsed a fold of dull green coverall, a dark webbing belt. The night watchman.

Caught. She felt Jazz's muscles clamp tighter.

"Here." The light shifted back, drowning their flash's petty beam, illuminating fallen timbers, ashes, and twisted metal below. "You on top, grab this." A long piece of wood, maybe a piece of doorframe, appeared. "Hang on real tight, and I'll try to haul you up."

It was at least ten feet to the floor. Therese stared at the ashes and burned junk, holding on as hard as she could. She could feel Jazz hesitating, his indecision humming though her. And in a few more minutes, she was going to lose her grip. . . . "Do it," she hissed. "Quick!"

With a grunt, he grabbed for the wood. His body twisted, his weight dragging Therese sideways, trying to torque her off her perch. Silent, focused on *flesh,* muscle-clench, finger-grip against greasy metal, she processed kaleidoscopic images of Jazz swinging from the bending strip of wood, legs flailing for a toehold, dust showering. Then the floor gave way. They fell together, Jazz and the night watchman, in a tangle of green and denim, dark skin and darker hair. For an eerie instant, the flash shone full on the night watchman's face: wide cheekbones, brown Hispanic skin, black hair, eyes full of shocked surprise. A moment later, they hit with the ugly flesh sound of impact. The big flash went out.

"Fuck!" Jazz's whisper seemed to carry throughout the entire airport.

"Is all that you can say?" Panic clawed at her and she needed to get *down.* Groping, her fingers touched wood, closed incredibly tight. She swung by her hands, feet scrabbling, finding solid footing. Fallen beams wove a web of shadow across the glow from her dim flash, guided her lower. Her feet crunched into ash, and a shadow moved. Resolved into Jazz, sooty faced.

"You okay?" Therese touched a shoulder, reassured by the warm flesh beneath T-shirt fabric.

"I guess." The shoulder lifted and dropped; a shrug, rather than rejection. "Nothing's broken, I don't think." He shifted from beneath her fingers, and a moment later the flashbeam wobbled as he picked it up. "I think our cop landed hard." The light touched a green-clad shoulder, slid upward to spotlight a stubbled jaw.

He was younger than she'd thought; not much older than her, with

curly dark hair and thick brows. Not exactly handsome. A trickle of blood down the side of his face glowed wet and crimson in the light. Jazz slid ashy gray fingers beneath his jaw.

"He's alive. I hate cops."

"I'm not . . . a cop." His eyes opened wide, and he tried to grin. It turned into a grimace of pain. "I'm private."

"Cop, private gun." Jazz shrugged. "Same deal."

"No, it isn't." He sat up slowly, leaned his bloody, ash-smeared forehead against a raised knee. "God, my head hurts. . . . I yelled when I saw you come this way. The fire two years back gutted the bottom level. They ought to tear the whole place down, but there'd go my job, so what the hell?"

"How do we get out of here?" Jazz sabered the light-sword through the darkness, revealing fallen beams and ashes, twisted wads of heat-warped metal and melted plastics. "I got this schedule. . . . "

"Beats me." The night watchman shrugged, grimaced again. "I guess we climb out."

Therese eyed the fire-eaten beams and sagging ceiling doubtfully, squeezed by the cavernous darkness. If they couldn't get out . . . surely somebody would check on the night watchman eventually. But what about Jazz? And her?

The night watchman grabbed one of the fallen beams, leaned his weight on it cautiously. It held. He clambered onto it, reaching for a broken segment of pipe.

With a crackle of breaking wood, the tangle shifted. He fell, landing on his feet, raising a cloud of fine ash. "So much for that." He coughed, holding his head, his shoulders hunched in pain.

"You're too heavy, guy. I gotta get *out* of here." Jazz's voice rose. "They're coming for me tonight. I *know* it."

"They." The night watchman's voice was slow and oddly shy. "They're always calling someone. In your pictures. Looking up and just . . . calling. It makes me look, too. I thought it was God at first, but it isn't, is it?" His voice got brisker. "They're coming, huh?"

"Yeah, they're coming." Jazz tilted his head back, staring up at the gap in the ceiling. "I never thought about God much. He didn't do anything for me. If you boost me, I can make it." His eyes flicked from one to the other of them. "I'll find something to let down to you guys. I promise."

He had no reason to come back here, or help them at all. He had a lot of reason *not* to. Like the camps, if he got busted, and maybe the night watchman *would* bust him, once they were back outside in the usual world. And he thought his aliens might come, and why shouldn't they

come while he was helping them? He'd just take off, and there they would be. Stuck.

And he had been right about her lights painting the poetry of loneliness across the night sky. And if there were any aliens up there, how could they *not* hear it—his call and hers. How could they *not* come? And . . . the night watchman believed. You could hear it in his voice. Why should *he* believe?

"We'll boost you." She held out her hands to the night watchman, like they'd already agreed. And he clasped them halfway, because they had.

"Try for that pipe," he jerked his chin upward as he laced his fingers with hers. "One, two . . . "

Eyes glinting, Jazz rested a foot lightly on their hands.

"Three!"

Therese and the watchman heaved together, straightening their knees, flinging Jazz at the ceiling. He rose in a perfect leap, caught the pipe. Swung once, twice for momentum, then reached one-handed, grabbed a solid joist. Feet kicking, showering them with dust and ash, he scrambled over the lip of the fallen ceiling and vanished.

Silence.

The flashlight yellowed and shadows drew in around them. Therese looked at the watchman.

"A couple of more minutes." The cut on his forehead was still oozing blood. "We can try the old escalator. The ceiling came down there, but we can probably get through. You know, your flying lights are . . . neat." The flash's glow reflected in his dark eyes, like distant campfires, or lost stars. "They're never the same twice, you know? It makes them special. I can't go back and call them up again, like with a video on the Net. I came here when I was a kid—I was flying down to live with my uncle in LA. All these people coming and going, happy and sad, excited. Everybody wanting to be somewhere, or wanting somebody to be here." He looked past her, frowned. "Your lights are like that—kind of a tangle, you know? All bright, and never the same again."

Therese swallowed a sudden thickness in her throat, because maybe he understood something better than she did. "But you cut them down. You paint out Jazz's tags."

"Well, yeah." He looked at her sadly. "I'd lose my job if I didn't. It matters, my job." And his voice had that same shyness as when he talked about Jazz's pictures.

"Yo." Scuffle from above, and a patter of new debris raining down.

"You came *back*." Therese looked up, grinning because she hadn't really expected him to, had already forgiven him.

"Yeah, but hurry, okay? They're here." Urgency roughened his voice.

"I'm not kidding. They're looking for me, but they might not know where to look."

The light was nothing more than a glimmer, barely illuminating the fall of tangled, snaky coils. Therese reached up, flinched as they tumbled down around her head and onto her shoulders. Some sort of electrical cable, black and pliable.

"It's tied. Come *on.*" Jazz's voice echoed through the darkness.

"Go ahead." As the night watchman nodded, the flash beam died. Darkness rushed in to fill the space where the light had been, expanding the terminal into infinity. She fumbled blindly for footing, trying to hurry, afraid they'd leave without him. Pulled herself upward, banging knees and elbows on invisible obstacles, found a good foothold, slipped, gasped with terror, then relief as Jazz grabbed her arms.

"You okay?" From below. Worried.

"Yes." And scrambled up onto the solid floor, face down on the crappy carpeting.

Behind her, in the dark, the timbers creaked as the night watchman climbed after her. She sat up, as he scrambled over the edge, so close that she felt the heat radiating from his body. Caught a whiff of sweat and musky man-smell. It came to her suddenly that she was still recording. She was so used to the rig she'd forgotten, and neither of the others had noticed her headband. She touched her eyelid, fingertips searching for, finding the tiny track-patch miraculously still in place. Laughed softly. Once.

"*Now* what's funny?" Jazz asked.

"Smile," she said, and stopped laughing, because in a second it would fall over into hysteria. "I wonder what dear Xavier will do with this bit?"

"Huh?" Jazz was dancing with urgency, footsteps shaking the fragile floor. "Let's go. Which way out of here, huh?"

"Left." The night watchman's fingers closed around her hand. "Watch out. There's stuff all over the floor."

She reached, found Jazz's hand in the dark, as if it had been waiting for her. They followed the watchman's lead, playing a weird blindman's-buff through the blackness. Do you feel Jazz trembling, Selva? He's afraid they won't wait. And if they don't, if they're not there, will he have the courage to wait any longer? And the night watchman is pulling because . . . he believes.

And she didn't know why, but in here, in the sooty dark, they all believed. Light ahead. It scattered her thoughts on a wave of relief. Main entrance—chipboard and sometimes panes of glass, amazingly unbroken. The night watchman tapped an urgent code into a dusty security box beside an intact door. A lock clicked and he shoved it open. Night

air rushed in—no colder than the air in here, but fresh and full of earth-scent, diminishing the smoke-reek. With a cry, Jazz darted through the doorway.

"There." He pointed, every fiber in his body taut and alive. Glow across the hummocky abandoned fields, opalescent in the thin fog that was rising. It could be a truck, Therese thought. Coming slow in the fog along the riverbed highway.

Or maybe it *wasn't*. Maybe it was a flying saucer landing, touching down to collect a lost child, take him home. Overhead, Pegasus soared, his wings spread above the rising fog, offering a ride to anyone who dared.

Jazz leaped onto the curb, paused, head lifted like a spike buck, looked back. His face was like the moon, brilliant with reflected light. The light of home. "Take it easy." He lifted his hand in a wave or a salute. Then he was gone, vaulting over the low concrete wall of the huge parking structure beyond the grass, running like a deer through the tall grass.

Across the wet, cold grass, the glow brightened. A truck, Therese thought. And when it took the curve where the riverbed bent, where she parked her car, she'd see the headlights. And would know it was a truck.

She closed her eyes.

Alien trapped among aliens—and aren't we all? Homesick for a home we can't remember, but we know it *has* to be there. Because if it isn't there somewhere, lying back behind memory, like the darkness lies behind the stars . . . then what's all this for? Her tears surprised her, scalding hot beneath her closed eyelids. You won't feel them, Selva. Because my face isn't covered by a skinthin mask, she thought bitterly. You won't know that I'm crying. You can dub that in later, if you want. If it seems right.

Beside her, the night watchman shared her silence. The wind blew through the overgrown grass of the field, whispering in its own language as it probed the cracks and corners of the abandoned terminal. Therese sighed, and opened her eyes. The highway was dark. Truck or flying saucer, the light was gone. And so was Jazz.

Back to the city? Back to doorways and shelters, back to the ten-dollar blow jobs and the threat of the camps?

Or was he on his way home? Therese wiped her face on the back of her arm.

"Are you all right?" The night watchman's voice was gentle.

"I guess." Therese climbed over the low wall that Jazz had leaped so easily, shivering because she was freezing in her light skins.

"I'll lend you a jacket." He stopped beside a small gray door in the wall of the parking structure. "If you want."

He had believed, too, down there. "Thanks," she said, because he

wanted her to take it. "I'd appreciate it." And for the first time, she really looked at him, saw, not a boogeyman, not a shadowy presence, but a *man*, a person, in the flesh. The halogen security lamps cast shadow beneath his cheekbones, turned his face stark and craggy. His dark eyes were on hers, and light glowed in their depths.

"You can drop it off any time." He unlocked the door, touched on the lights.

Therese blinked in the sudden glare. His office. Terminal screen on a desk, basic kitchen-wall with microwave and freezer above a cheap new counter top and tiny sink. A bookshelf full of old hardcopy books. A small futon lay on the floor by the wall, scattered with a few toys, a bright green blanket tucked around the curled and sleeping shape of a small child.

"My son." His face softened for a minute. "He lives here with me. Sorry about the mess." He sounded apologetic as he picked up a plastic trashbag from the floor.

This was home, she thought. For him and his son. She'd heard the echo in his voice when he'd said "the job matters." Home. He'd still been able to understand what Jazz had painted on the hangar wall, what she had woven across the night sky.

"Here." He held out a plastic trash bag.

She opened it, looked in. Tangled strands of light fiber. Neat rolls of transparent plastic. String. "My stuff." She looked up, met his dark eyes, brilliant in his soot-streaked face. "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"I'll walk you to the gate." He ushered her out, closed the door gently and protectively on the sleeping child.

They didn't speak as they followed the empty driveway out to the main gate. It was chainlink, but new, topped with shiny thorns of razor-wire. He touched a keypad set into a concrete pillar, and the gate groaned, began to rumble open. "I got to go chase the boarders." He smiled crookedly. "They'll be disappointed if I don't."

"This is your performance art." She returned his smile.

"Hey, whatever." He spread his hands, then hesitated. "I . . . didn't look. When Jazz ran. You didn't either, did you?"

"No," she murmured. If she had, if he had, they would have turned that flying saucer back into a truck, have turned Home back into a Front Street meat rack, or a detention camp.

"I'm glad," he said, and home hummed beneath his words.

Maybe that's what let him understand. Because he'd made his home here, for himself and his son. But the gate was open now, no longer a barrier between Therese and the real world of money and deadlines. She sighed, resenting that open gate, feeling subtly betrayed. "Why did you call in my car for trespass?" She had to ask. "I can't afford the fine."

"I didn't." Genuine confusion—his turn to look betrayed. "I wouldn't do that."

And he *wouldn't*. "You're right," she said, and sudden grief clutched her. She stretched up, and kissed him on the mouth. After a moment of surprise, he responded, lips pressing against hers, warm and firm with life.

Then she walked away, and he didn't try to stop her, as she marched down the asphalt driveway and then out to her car, feet dry on the asphalt, heart heavy. And went . . . not home, but back to where she lived.

It only occured to her when she was halfway there that she didn't know the night watchman's name, and that he had never asked for hers.

Urgent messages from Selva greeted her. *Call me. Call me right away.* And the grief weighed on her shoulders, heavy as lead. When she put on her goggles, Selva's image coalesced instantly, as if she'd been waiting for Therese to call. "My God, 'Rese, are you okay?"

Her face looked haggard, head and shoulders only against a pastel wall—which meant that this was realtime, a straight video transmission from her apartment, not translated through a virtual self. No tricks of programmed emotion, then. Except the ultimate, the one she'd already pulled. "You were looking over my shoulder tonight." The first time she'd called, she'd known that Therese had been at the airport. *Were you flying your kites?* she had asked, but she had *known*. I missed it, Therese thought numbly. I wanted to miss it. "How long have you been in my filespace?"

Selva looked away, convicted by her own worry.

"Did you watch it all? My flight, our fall, everything? *You* turned in my car for trespass." Therese's voice cracked. "My God, Selva, *why?*"

"I didn't watch. Not much." Selva faced her, eyes bleak. "I was monitoring the transmission, watching the parameters in digital, and when the activity went to the end of the scale, I checked the visuals." She paused for a heartbeat. "I saw you fall. For a minute, I thought . . . " Her shoulders jerked. "I stopped watching when you climbed out."

"Nice." Therese's lips felt numb. She was beyond anger now, as stunned as if the sky had cracked and rained down on her head. "So, not only do you get my car busted, you can sell my recording *direct* to Xavier. Hey, always cut out the middleman whenever possible!"

"Stop it, 'Rese." Selva didn't look away this time, didn't try to hide the pain in her face. "Yeah, I turned your car in. Xavier's looking for new blood, and I figured if he saw your stuff—if you maybe found out that it isn't so bad, working for somebody . . . If you'd turned it down, I would have paid the fine myself, but I wanted. . . . " She clenched her fists, her

face pale and stark. "I wanted to make you *hear* me, okay? I love you. Don't you get it? Do you have to tie our love to your definition of success? Can't you just let *us* happen? Do you think I care if I'm paying the rent?"

The anguish in her voice gutted Therese's anger. Do you care that much? she wanted to ask, but the words wouldn't come. It was her turn to look away. She'd seen it after all—whether that light was a truck or not. She had it on file, and so did Selva—the conclusion of Jazz's wild dash across the airport field. Stored in patterns of excited electrons.

"I dumped the file from tonight." Selva had turned away again, her shoulders drooping, where they never drooped, always lifted proudly, strong and muscular. "If you had gotten hurt . . . if you had died . . ." She swallowed, her throat leaping. "I also downloaded money for the fine into your account. You're the one who has to decide, and I guess you have. I'm sorry. I love you, and I'll leave you alone. Will you please . . . be careful out there?"

And the screen went blank.

Therese stared at it for a long moment; angry at Selva for the fine, for the betrayal of that hack into her filespace. She snapped her fingers, called up her workspace. The file was there, bounced from Earth to sky to Earth again, an airplane icon glowing in the air. She could *know*. She stared at it. *Your lights say the same thing,* he'd told her.

"You're wrong. I'm not like you," she whispered. She had looked at the night watchman and seen a man, not a cop, or an alien, or a boogeyman. She had peeked at his cramped apartment and his sleeping son, and had felt its tug.

And Jazz knew. Poised on the curb, he hadn't asked her to come along. Therese let her breath out slowly, touched the airplane. "System, delete," she said.

Are you sure you want to delete this file? her system asked. *You have no backup.*

Maybe you had to define home for yourself, and then believe in it enough to make it real. "System, yes," she said and let her breath out in a rush. "Delete the file."

File deleted. The airplane winked out of existence.

"I hope you're already home," Therese murmured. And went into her bank account to find the three thousand dollars Selva had left there. And used it to pay her fine. On the table, the fountain of glass showered the room with fractured light. Maybe it wasn't a message of failure. Maybe Selva had known her well enough to send her something that existed only for its own sake, for beauty. Maybe Selva was trying to define home for herself.

Outside, Pegasus spread his wings to fly beyond the stars. Therese hung the night watchman's jacket on a chair. Neatly. She would return

it in the daylight, ask his name, and his son's name, visit with them for a few minutes. And then . . . she'd buy a ticket for the mag-lev. Going to Vancouver, B.C. For a visit, or for a long time, she didn't know yet. They were going to be angry at each other for awhile. Maybe there were depths beyond the anger. Therese picked up the glass, turning it to scatter the rays from the cheap light overhead. "You were right, Selva," she murmured. "I was afraid." Of the real world, of Pegasus's broad back. Still was. But she would bring along the light-net that the night watchman had returned with her. Selva would know a good place to fly it. They could cast it one more time at Pegasus. ●



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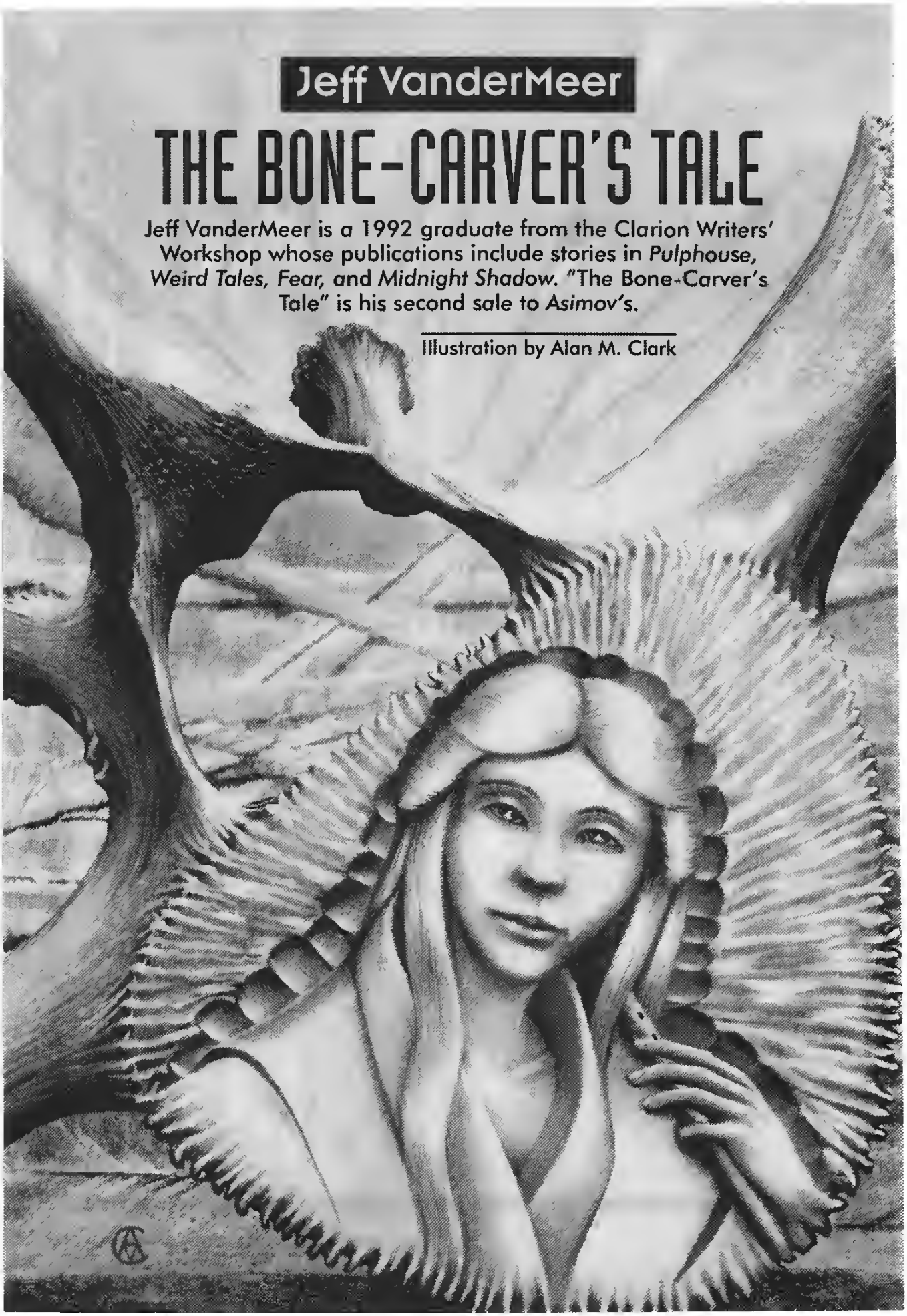
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THE BONE-CARVER'S TALE

Jeff VanderMeer is a 1992 graduate from the Clarion Writers' Workshop whose publications include stories in *Pulphouse, Weird Tales, Fear,* and *Midnight Shadow.* "The Bone-Carver's Tale" is his second sale to *Asimov's.*

Illustration by Alan M. Clark



One night, some months before the monsoons, the bone carver Sajit Xuan-Ti left his house, made from the whittled ribcage of a whale, and walked down to the black sand beach which had been his, and his alone, for six years. He had awakened from dreams of Angkor Thom, the great religious city to the North, and had seen the visages of its rulers broken along the boundaries of the land of Kampuchea, where the Mekong River flows into the China Sea.

The weather was hot and dry, and even under the cooling glance of the moon he felt restless. During the day, the sails of junks at sea had seemed to droop. Now his sarong stuck to his skin as he paced the beach, hoping for a flash of bone amid the shells and seaweed. Often, he would find crocodile skulls, or the streamlined spines of dolphins. These he would gather, bring back to his house, and treat with a distillation of ginseng root, camphor oil, and dried copra.

Increasingly, he spent his days receiving nobles and holy men who admired his carvings. Within a Xuan-Ti carving, it was said, one could find the souls of one's ancestors; within the eyes of a Xuan-Ti figurine lay the mystery of death. But Sajit ignored such speculation. He saw only the bone, which was smooth to the touch and smelled, in its purest form, like water, like air.

"*Namo kuanshiyihian Bodhissattiva mahasattva*," he chanted, over the hiss of the surf, remembering the *scree* and *clack* of the bone as he worked on it, more pleasant than the laughter of women or the clatter of dice against a gambling board. Sometimes, he closed his eyes (as he did now) his hands knowing the way more readily than his eyes, and he would listen to the tempo, the rhythm, of *scree* (a narrow, blade edge stroke) and *clack* (the flat of the blade), to tell if the work went well or poorly.

He spotted the delicate bones of a scorpion fish splayed out in the sand. It could become a mask, perhaps, with the bones worked into a tangle of feathers.

As he stooped over the fish, the fluid trill of a *serunai* rose above the crackle of waves and his fingers trailed in the sand. Never had he heard the instrument played with such precision. The music spoke of the coming of the mountains to the sea: liquid sound with the power of waves and breakers. As a child in his father's butchershop, he had made a *serunai* from the bones of a pig, but the sounds he had forced from the long stem, the five holes, had mocked the caw of crows.

Sajit stood up, the scorpion fish forgotten. For, in the sound of the *serunai*, he heard the familiar blindness which struck him every so often—a fumbling in the dark for form and content and style. In his fumbling, his hand would become firm, his knife strokes sharp and

purposeful. The feeling which welled up inside him at such discovery made him shiver, as if the energy of the Gods had entered into him.

The music came from the direction of the village of Go Oc Eo, and he turned that way, head held high as if to sniff out a new and unknown scent. The wind no longer felt hot. The smell of bone, salty with the sea and the acidic bite of the liquids he used to preserve bone, rose in his nostrils. The music played on, rising and falling in tempo, drawing him close and then setting him free, before imprisoning him once more.

The smell of bone brought back the feel of bone, the roughness where it had snapped to a will greater than itself and then the smoothness after he had shined it with an extract of mango and water chestnut, the smoothness which excited his nerves, made his fingers capable of even grander, more daring designs.

The *serunai* drew so many feelings out of him that he wondered, fleetingly, if he was in love. He could not tell. He had never been in love before.

"Who plays the *serunai* at night in the village of Go Oc Eo?" he asked Jen Jen the next morning. Jen Jen was his housekeeper, an older woman from Go Oc Eo, at least fifty, who had fine black hair, a small nose, and a mischievous leer. He often thought she must be an incarnation of the Naga Queen, and more menacing. Yet, without her, he could barely remember to feed or clothe himself, so intent was he on the work. The plates from breakfast—rice and eel curry—would lie scattered on his work table until she removed them.

"Prei Chen plays the *serunai*," Jen Jen replied as she wove a tiger orange sarong upon her loom. "The Four Fishers for Gossip tell me she is the most accomplished master since Tow Som. She has played at the Khmer court in Angkor Thom."

"Hmmm," Sajit said. "I believe I shall use the water buffalo jaw to depict Hanuman, the monkey god—this flaw, here, resembles his body. I need only accentuate the lines."

It did not matter to him that he had no living model to work from. When he had lived in the Khmer court, he had rarely glanced at a woman or lain with the prostitutes of the Avenue of a Thousand Pleasures, and yet from the haunch of a snow leopard, he had created a sensuous scene depicting a courtesan, her lover, and the kinsman to whom she had been pledged.

Jen Jen slapped her thigh, her hand leaving an imprint of white against the smooth brown of her skin. "You work much too hard, Sajit Xuan-Ti! You work so hard you see monkey gods in a water buffalo's jaw! If your parents were alive today, Sajit, they would see that you are still a child to live in such bliss."

"Hmmm," said Sajit. "Why is she in Go Oc Eo?"

Jen Jen took up her shuttle. "Why do you wish to know?" She snorted. "Perhaps she has come for you?"

Bones, hardened and bleached to an unbearable white hue, awaited his knife two days later, on a morning when the sky was layered like rice paper and the wind sputtered and spun against the surf.

In the Khmer Court, at the University of Yasoharapura, Sajit had studied the anatomy and physiology of mammals, fish, and birds—and under his ministrations, some bones had already taken on new life: ape skulls became flasks for plum wine, for the apes of the northern Sukhothai Jungle often competed with An tribesmen for plums; thigh bones from the striped tapir became matching oars carved with scenes from the Sanskrit epic *The Ramayana*.

He was etching the eyes of the Goddess Kali into a fruit bat's wing bone when music washed over him like a summer gale, treacherous, but possessed of a freshness and vitality that overwhelmed the musk of dead fish, the bitterness of sea salt. It cried out above the wind which stung the palm trees on the shore, shook the sand, scattered the fiddler crabs.

A *serunai*, played by a master.

He did not move. He did not blink. Surely Prei Chen had not come here?

Jen Jen ran through the open door and crouched in front of him, spilling words onto the floor like dried rice, scattered almost to senselessness: "Prei Chen begs to speak with Sajit Xuan-Ti, master carver. She has seen your work. She has seen your work in the courts of the Khmer rulers—and the Thai. She wishes to visit the illustrious man behind such art."

He did not move. He did not blink.

"Well, come on! Get up! Get out there!" Jen Jen tugged his arm until he rose to his feet. She straightened his sarong, and, chuckling, shoved him out the door.

A woman waited for him in the antechamber, her legs crossed beneath her on the prayer rug. She cradled a *serunai* in her arms.

When she saw Sajit, she bowed; a smile creased her face as she looked up at him.

"I am honored," she said, "to be in the presence of such a man."

He bowed. "And I in the presence of such a woman."

But the woman, he saw, with his bone carver's eye, was merely pretty. Her legs resembled the stocky legs of a water buffalo, muscled but not graceful. A mole marred her right cheek and her sarong was clumsily tied. Her smile framed a mouth much too wide to be seductive. The bells

that she had attached to her ankles jangled harshly. The kohl around her eyes was too dark a shade.

Nevertheless, his pulse quickened, and his own movement to sit, the way he crossed his legs, seemed awkward, ugly. Jen Jen had disappeared.

"What has brought you here?" he asked, ignoring the tension in his body when Prei Chen caressed her *serunai*.

Her stare split him open, like a ripe leechee nut. "I came to see you. I have admired your work in many courts."

He thought he heard the rattling of bones in his workshop, but it was only his heart. She had anointed herself with the scent of frangiapani, a sweet smell which announced her suitability for marriage. Arabic and Sanskrit words were woven into her sarong, all of which spoke of union and commitment.

Her eyes were an unreflecting black, and her hair as flowing and shimmering a hue as the mountain streams.

When he did not reply, she said, "I have followed your work to you, to see if the artist is as beautiful and worthy." She reached over and placed a hand on his shoulder. The touch scorched his nerve ends. Fear, he told himself. It was fear and the temptation of the woman before him.

He fingered a bone sculpture on the table next to them.

"I shall play for you," she said, and put the *serunai* to her perfect lips. (No, not perfect, he told himself. Flawed, as she was flawed in every other way.)

She played the sensual music of the Mekong, music which followed the river's sinuous curves, lined its banks with treble notes and deep clefts. She played of the fisher folk and the clay silt which enriched the farmers' fields. She played of the mongoose and tiger, come to the water's edge to drink, and to stare. The music changed, became slower, more thoughtful: soft, introspective notes that told Sajit Xuan-Ti, *I saw your work in the courts and I followed the trail left by your work—the scenes of love and of hate, the perfection and the artful lines—until I could see only that the man who produced such work must be a great lover, a wise man, a man with whom I could join.*

The *serunai* spoke of her craft's loneliness, how for her craft to have meaning, she must have union with another. She sang of the wonder of the conjoining of the two crafts, the *serunai* and the bone carving. How, together, they could make art more powerful, more elegant than any before or since.

Sajit heard all of these things in the gentle pressure of her mouth on the *serunai*. His ears buzzed and his mouth felt dry. Sajit stared into

the eyes of his bone sculpture, an elegant woman with willowy legs, and could not meet Prei Chen's gaze.

"Sajit Xuan-Ti?" Prei Chen's voice quavered. "Sajit Xuan-Ti, look at me."

His name, said with such hope and such longing. Fear settled over him.

"You are not beautiful," he said, staring at his bone maiden. "You are not beautiful as this sculpture is beautiful. You are not as beautiful as the bones." His heart clattered and his hands felt icy and his breath came shallow and quick, as if he was dying then, there, in that place.

When he looked into her face, drawn by his own awful curiosity, he saw that her eyes were like dead stars, all the energy coiled within, but not a mote of brightness escaping. Her body had become rigid and her mouth had drawn tight, the lips trembling only slightly.

"You are not as beautiful as your art, Sajit Xuan-Ti," she said and turned and ran to the door. "You are ugly."

The monsoons came, and with them orange, moist skies. The Mekong overflowed its banks, disgorging yellow silt from upriver and, for those who drank from it, the yellow-green sores of the sleeping disease. The Khmer Emperors grew desperate in their struggle against the Kings of Siam and did not wait out the rains. Battles raged on ground that had turned to mud.

But Sajit Xuan-Ti continued in his work. He loved the monsoons, for he could remain in his workshop for many hours, the air cool and the rain a reminder of the fertility and creativity which fueled his efforts. Raindrops needled his rooftop, fell upon the small bones of otter and dik dik which filled the gaps in the whale's rib cage. The voices of the animals rose in a hush-hush-sussurah in his awareness.

His bones were now so beautiful that they no longer took the form of people or animals, but only suggested the lines of people or animals, so that the purchaser must guess the meaning behind each sculpture.

Jen Jen teased him (or taunted—he could not tell which) with updates on Prei Chen gleaned from the Four Fishers for Gossip, but only when she was mad at him, if he had failed to comment on the sarong she had woven, or the splendid meal of prawns she had prepared.

"In the courts of the Thai vassals, Prei Chen plays the song of a young woman rejected by a man she loved."

"Hmmm," he would reply, pretending not to hear her. "The prawns were delicious, Jen Jen."

"Thank you, Sajit," she would say, and he would hear disappointment in her voice, as if he had missed something—a subtle inference, perhaps, a nuance of speech that had proven quite beyond him.

This game continued until the day, two months after the monsoons

had begun, when Jen Jen came to his house crying, dressed in the stark white of mourning. The stark white of bone, he could not help thinking.

"What is wrong?" He took Jen Jen by the arm and led her to a chair. "What is the matter?"

"Prei Chen is dead."

"Dead?"

He sat down in his chair, hands upturned in his lap, eyes staring at the floor. He felt as though his bones had been ripped out of him, that he was a body without a skeleton.

"How?" he asked, not daring to look into her eyes, afraid that if he did he might lose control, his mask of a face crumble. Why couldn't he breathe?

"There was a battle at Angkor Thom, near—"

"I know what it is near."

"—a battle at Angkor Thom. The Khmer and the Thai fought for three days and three nights until finally, finally . . ."

His vision blurred.

"Jen Jen," he said and held her hand. "Tell me. Simply and slowly."

"Finally, the Khmer killed the Thai king and the Thai fled the battlefield. Prei Chen and several other artisans were found among the bodies of the slain. She had been entertaining at the Thai court. All of Go Oc Eo is mourning her death."

His hands and legs shook and his mouth kept trying to widen in a rictus of grief, but he would not let it. He felt Jen Jen's eyes upon him then, and set his jaw and clenched his hands against what he felt inside.

"Can you say nothing, Sajit? Can you say nothing at all? Do you feel for anything except your precious bones?"

The tightness in his body became unbearable and in one furious, desperate motion he rose to his feet and shouted at her, "Get out! Get out! Leave me be! I have work to finish. . . ."

Jen Jen's mouth quivered. She looked at him strangely, hesitated, then bowed and said, "I am gone, Sajit Xuan-Ti. I am leaving."

The rains tapped and tormented Sajit's roof ever more and he would stir restlessly in his sleep, hearing the whisper of the *serunai*, hearing the ghosts of the bones. Wake up. *No.* Wake up, they insisted. *No.* But, finally, when they said to him, in Prei Chen's voice, "You are ugly," he would wake, drenched in sweat and swatting at mosquitoes. "Jen Jen?" His voice sounded fragile in the dark. "Jen Jen, are you there?"

Every night now, Sajit walked the black sand beach. The music of Prei Chen's *serunai* filled his ears, so he could not hear the rush and withdrawal of the waves as they plunged against the coast. He envisioned

her bones buried in a grave in the God-city of Angkor Thom and sometimes he would wake from the thought to find himself thrashing in the surf, spittle clinging to his lips.

The bones he worked with became unfamiliar to him—vaguely threatening, the skulls those of gibbering beasts, the claws and the fangs out of some harrowing Hindu demonology.

He thought often, as he had not thought for years, of his father's butcher shop and his youth spent toiling behind the counter, amongst the blood and the offal and the shards of bone. How the carcasses, dangling from the roof beams, bled onto the floor. There was such calm on his father's creased face as he gutted them slowly, methodically. At night, the green light from the lanterns turned the blood dark, almost purple, and his father's knees, whorled with wrinkles, took on that same sheen.

The towering height of the counter, the light beyond, and the customers' faces, looming. The *scree* and *clack* of another time and place.

Once, deep in his heart, he had wondered if there could be anything else to the world beyond blood and bone and lantern light.

Then, one evening, the moon spoke to him. He looked up at its shining face and his father stared down at him.

The moon said, *Sajit Xuan-Ti, think of the bones lying wasted in Angkor Thom. Think of the bones of the finest* serunai *player in the land. The delicacy, the lightness of them. Would they not be more perfect, more pure, more beautiful than anything you have ever carved before? Do they not tempt you more than the woman tempted you in life? Do you not long for the bones of Prei Chen, lying buried under the eyes of the Gods in Angkor Thom?* The question curled in his mind like a finger, beckoning him into the heartlands of war.

The waves lashed the beach and the sky, already dark, became black: a squall, blowing across the peninsula.

"Yes," Sajit said, "Yes."

There was no reply.

Just the waves lashing the shore. Just the moon, bright as a perfectly rounded and smoothed bone.

"The bones," he muttered to himself, looking at his hands as if for the first time. His fingers were thin and long, but rough, calloused: the hands of a bone carver and nothing else.

Relentlessly, night after night, in a torrent, the moon voice spoke to him—in the whisper of the webs the gonchai spider wove to catch its prey, through the chorus of the barking tree frog, through the slats in his house, the flashes and scintillations of the sea forming Sanskrit before his eyes. *"The bones,"* the moon said. *"Think of the bones. . . ."*

When the rains were at their most ferocious, the encroaching jungle a wall of green which seemed to have no end, Sajit slipped out from between the leviathan's ribs, taking only a sack of carvings with him, and disappeared from the sight of Go Oc Eo forever.

Sajit Xuan-Ti traveled by night and hid by day. In the darkness, he could gauge the direction and distance of the warring armies: where they fought, the sky erupted in funnels of fire, watch towers ablaze. The horizon was a red scar which bled into the darkness. He could hear the screams of wounded battle elephants and he thought of the hundreds of Buddhas he might still carve from their bones.

Refugees fled from the lights. They brushed against him mothlike in their rags, their shoeless feet churning the mud, their progress pitifully slow. When they saw him, walking toward Angkor Thom, they often stared at him blankly, the joke taking time to settle into the mud, and through the mud into their souls. Then: laughter. As if he were a clown. Or mad.

"Look! Look!" an old man shouted. And: "Look!" again, as if moved by the absurdity of Sajit's destination to repeat no other word, but to announce the bone carver's presence with the insistence of a mynah bird.

He did not reply to such taunts, but trudged toward Angkor Thom. Surely, he told himself, it was not so bad. Surely not. He ignored the tangled limbs of corpses, their slack mouths, the way shadow traced their faces as if with charcoal.

But he could not ignore the ground under his feet. A hole had opened in his left sandal and through this hole came all the mud, the water, the blood, the excrement, upon which he walked. Slowly, his left leg became sensitized to the hole, until he trembled with each step, for each step brought with it a premonition of the land's pain. The pain spread through his bones until each seemed alive with agony. He felt his face twisting into a rictus of discomfort, so that his grin was like the cockeyed reflection of a slit moon in the sea—curving up one side and down the other. The refugees began to run from the man he knew he had become: emaciated and rag-clad, with a leer that leapt across his face in time to the flinching limp with which he negotiated the ground. His hands dangled from the soaked cuffs of his sarong like the roots of a long-dead ginger plant.

In places where the armies had not slashed and burned, the road reverted to jungle, for without the civil authorities to cut them back, the trees spread where they pleased, their roots firmly entrenched, even in the mud. The constant rain—which, like a ringing in his ears, became an annoyance, then a presence to be ignored, and finally a dismal fact he could not escape and therefore resigned himself to—this rain fed the

roots, the branches, the leaves, until by the seventh day, he could see only a wall of trees ahead, broken by a few scattered tiles.

On the ninth day, the skies were clear, and, early in the morning, an enormous face stared down at Sajit through the wall of green: the visage of Emperor Jayavarman, carved into the sharply triangular temple tops of Angkor Thom. Under the gaze of Jayavarman's langorous eyes, the firm but caring mouth, Sajit should have felt at ease, protected, but the sweetness of corrupted flesh and the brusque, choking sour of burning bones dispelled any such illusion. He came out from the forest onto a wide plain, upon which lay the city-shrine Angkor Thom. Ahead of him, two lines of statues, cut from solid stone and connected at the arms and legs, formed a passageway to the gateway, which rose one-hundred-fifty meters high. From every tower, Jayavarman's visage peered down, until it seemed to Sajit that a giant audience had gathered to watch him.

He shuddered, whispered *"Namo kuanshiyihuan Bodhissattiva mahasattva."* Jen Jen had said he knew nothing except this art, but here that would help him, for the corpses would not bother him if he could think of them as bone.

It was not until he had almost passed by the rows of fire-blackened statues that he felt the eyes of one following him.

Sajit stopped walking. The silence of the city struck him then and fear twisted in his belly. He did not think it odd that a statue should watch him; had not the moon with his father's face spoken to him?

No, he avoided the statue's eyes because he feared he would find reflected there the same fascination and the same laughter he had seen in the refugees' faces. Instead, he looked at the bodies sprawled across the entrance. Most were soldiers, dressed in the uniforms of a half-dozen armies. To the left, someone had stacked them in patterns like lotus flower petals. The smoldering corpses sent plumes of smoke into the air; the smoke covered the face of the south tower, distorting Jayavarman's lips into a frown. The smell filled Sajit's nostrils and he felt a lightness in his stomach. With revulsion, he realized he was hungry.

He turned to face the statue. A dwarf had taken the place of the stonework; some machinery of war had dislodged the statuary, leaving only the base, upon which sat the dwarf, who stared neither left nor right, but straight ahead. The left eye had given Sajit the illusion that someone watched him; made of glass, it seemed to stare directly at Sajit no matter how he moved in relation to it. He had believed the dwarf to be a statue because the man's skin matched the fire-washed stone: a pure black sheen which marked him as South Indian.

Sajit smiled, nodded, bowed, but the dwarf stared straight ahead. He

put down his bag of carvings and stepped close enough to touch the man's shoulder. The eyes still stared straight ahead.

The dwarf wore a gray tunic and a matching dhoti. A karta, his only weapon, was stuck through his sash and lying beside him on the stone were a necklace of silver bells, a mask of the Monkey God, Hanuman, and a staff carved from sandalwood, the musk from it overlaying the rancid odor of flesh.

"A jester!" Sajit exclaimed.

The dwarf's features itched to be carved into bone; he resembled a gnarled banyan root dark with rot. Jowls hung below his chin and folds of skin drooped over the eyes. Wrinkles creased the forehead, hidden by the same blackness which had masked him among the real statues.

Blood began to trickle from the right eye, following a set course amid the wrinkles, which were marked by a dark line where blood had dried days before.

Sajit wiped at the blood with the hem of his sarong.

"How long have you been sitting here?" he asked, not expecting a reply.

"Four days," the dwarf said, the good eye locking onto Sajit so swiftly that the bone carver snatched his hand away from the tears of blood and stuttered an incoherent reply.

"Four days," the dwarf repeated, and smiled. Yellow teeth shone against the absolute dark of his face. "Three nights. No one has approached me until now nor could I, it seemed, move in all that time, until you touched the blood upon my face."

"You hid from the soldiers?"

The dwarf shrugged. "I sat here and pretended indifference to their battles. Before, when I ran, it seemed that the very act of flight made them pursue me. So I took up my post here, in the way of the Buddha, and have watched the blood sport of the Khmer and the Thai, and their allies, as they stalk the same ground over and over. I have opened my mouth to the sky and survived on rain water. . . . Who are you to walk beneath the shadow of these gates?"

"I am Sajit Xuan-Ti, the bone carver."

The dwarf began to laugh, but put off Sajit's questions with, "You are not he. I know Sajit Xuan-Ti well. I have bought some of his carvings and stolen more from the Khmer court, and you are not he. Everyone knows he resides in the village of Go Oc Eo where he works at his craft by the sea and knows naught of the world."

"And yet, I am Sajit."

The dwarf grunted, looked away. "I would rather you had stayed home and carved for the rest of us, who are more world-weary than you ever need be—if indeed you are Sajit. My name is Tien Tievar—a jester, a clown in the court of the Khmer."

"Did you know the *serunai* player, Prei Chen? Do you know how she died?"

The words came out swiftly, clattering one on top of the other, and he lowered his head in frustration, cupped his face with his hands.

"Forgive me, Tievar. I have not eaten in three days. My hands shake. I cannot remember the simplest rules of bone carving. The moon has told me to seek out the bones of Prei Chen and carve them into something wondrous, something with as much beauty as her music."

"The moon is deceitful, Sajit," the dwarf said, his blind eyes looking out toward the horizon. He was silent for a long time. Finally, when it seemed he might never speak again, he said, "I knew of Prei Chen. I heard her play many times in the court. How she died, I cannot tell you. I do not know. No living person knows."

"Where is she buried?"

Tievar shrugged. "In Angkor Thom. Under the shadow of the Naga Queen, but where within the tangle of bodies? No one knows."

"Will you show me?"

Tievar smiled. "I am afraid my position here is too comfortable. If I should force my palms to remain upward in my lap, toward Heaven, then, like the Buddha, I shall go there when I die."

Sajit nodded, turned toward the gates of Angkor Thom.

". . . but if you could do me one kindness. I cannot move my arms. Could you place the mask of Hanuman upon my face? Thus I may sleep behind the mask yet have the appearance of watchfulness should the armies return."

"Of course."

When Sajit leaned over the dwarf to attach the mask, he saw the blood which had gathered in a pool behind Tievar, caused by a gash in his back which had paralyzed him. Maggots tore at Tievar's spinal cord.

"I shall leave a carving of the Buddha beside you, for safety and luck," Sajit said, hoping Tievar could not see his hands tremble as he swung the sack of bones back over his shoulder.

The dwarf only smiled.

Sajit Xuan-Ti entered Angkor Thom, the eyes of kings above him, a man weeping blood behind, the sun just another eye—jaundiced yellow, with a spirit of evil within its corona which made him want to lie down and weep; to put aside his bag of carvings and hug the loamy ground to him.

But the bones in his legs held him upright. The bones in his feet continued to lift his legs and let them fall.

They fell now upon bodies, the hole in his sandal driving him past madness with the feel of flesh beneath his own flesh. Soldiers by the

hundreds littered the interior—dragged over walls, battlements, and each other. The battles had raged for months so that the dead were layered three deep, a light green moss coating the most recently fallen, a yaw of bones sticking up from the earth the only marker for those who had died months before. The smell hit Sajit at the gateway: mingled blood and rot and earth and flesh. It scoured his clothes, curled into his nostrils, made him faint. He half fell, put out a hand to balance himself, and splashed his thumb into the water-filled pool of an eyesocket, scattering mosquito larvae.

Strangest of all to Sajit were the fresh wounds, which at first he could not tear his eyes from as he wandered toward the central courtyard. These bodies—like those of animals in his father's butchershop—still had moist flesh upon them, some bloated with the rains. Beneath the pale flesh, the slashing red of unclean wounds, he could see the startling white riddle of bone, a purity at odds with the surrounding offal. The flesh disturbed him. It frightened him, and he hurried by the bodies. Here was a substance he could not make beautiful or carve to his own desires.

The sky had turned a blue shot through with amber. There was no sound. Even the birds were silent: enormous Malay vultures that moved with a slow respect for the dead, a daintiness which spoke of morticians more than grave robbers.

He found Prei Chen where Tievar had told him to look—beneath the shadow of the Naga Queen, whose nine stone heads reared skyward in denial of the death beneath her coils.

Beside the grave, an elephant had died, falling onto its side. Four men lay within the caved-in flesh, and this puzzled Sajit until he realized that the men had died atop the elephant and had fallen through to rest among the beast's organs once the flesh had grown too infirm to support them.

The sight of the elephant calmed him. Perhaps it was the peaceful way the four men seemed to sleep within its womb, or the white tusk which reminded him of the elephant god, Ganesha.

All such speculation left him when he saw Prei Chen, lying half-in, half-out of a shallow grave. Though she had been in the earth for three months, flesh still clung to her body. Her face had disassembled itself until he barely recognized her, could not even catalog the bones which stuck through to ruin her beauty. Someone had placed her *serunai* within her encircling arms. He approached on hands and knees until he had crept to her side. The earth covered her torso, but her arms lay free. He put down his sack and took her hand in his. The flesh had dried so

that he could feel the bones. Her skin was warm, but so was the earth beneath her.

He tugged at her arm, but she would not move; there was too much dirt and he was too weak. The Malay vultures watched him with idle interest from atop the elephant's skull.

He tugged again.

"Prei Chen," he said, speaking to her as he tugged a third time. "Prei Chen."

But she would not move from beneath the Naga Queen.

When he tried one last, desperate time, her arm came off in his grasp and he sprawled, panting, against the side of the elephant, looking into the faces of the four men it had swallowed after its death. The dirt of the grave stung his chin. The taste of the grave coated his tongue. He looked at Prei Chen's arm, which he still held in his left hand; yellow bone stuck out from the end, but he felt no desire to carve it. Instead, he shuddered and tears came to his eyes, though he could not pin a reason to them. He could not remember the features of Jen Jen's face. He could not even remember the first rule of bone carving. His craft seemed to him no art at all, but artifice and deception. There was nothing except flesh, and there never had been, and he had forgotten more than he learned when he carved the bone.

He crawled up from the elephant, until he came again to Prei Chen's corpse. He looked full into her rotting face and covered her body with his, caressed her hair with his calloused, bone carver hands and said, "Prei Chen. Prei Chen," until it became a meaningless chant, a ritual to hold off despair which even Tievar eventually heard, sitting in his tears of blood, among the visages of the Kings of Angkor Thom, in the land of Kampuchea, where the Mekong River flows into the China Sea. ●

EUROPA/SOLE INHABITANT

An ice caterpillar crawls from the ship's belly
it steers around bad ices and fracture zones
and reforms in a dome upon a smooth plain of white

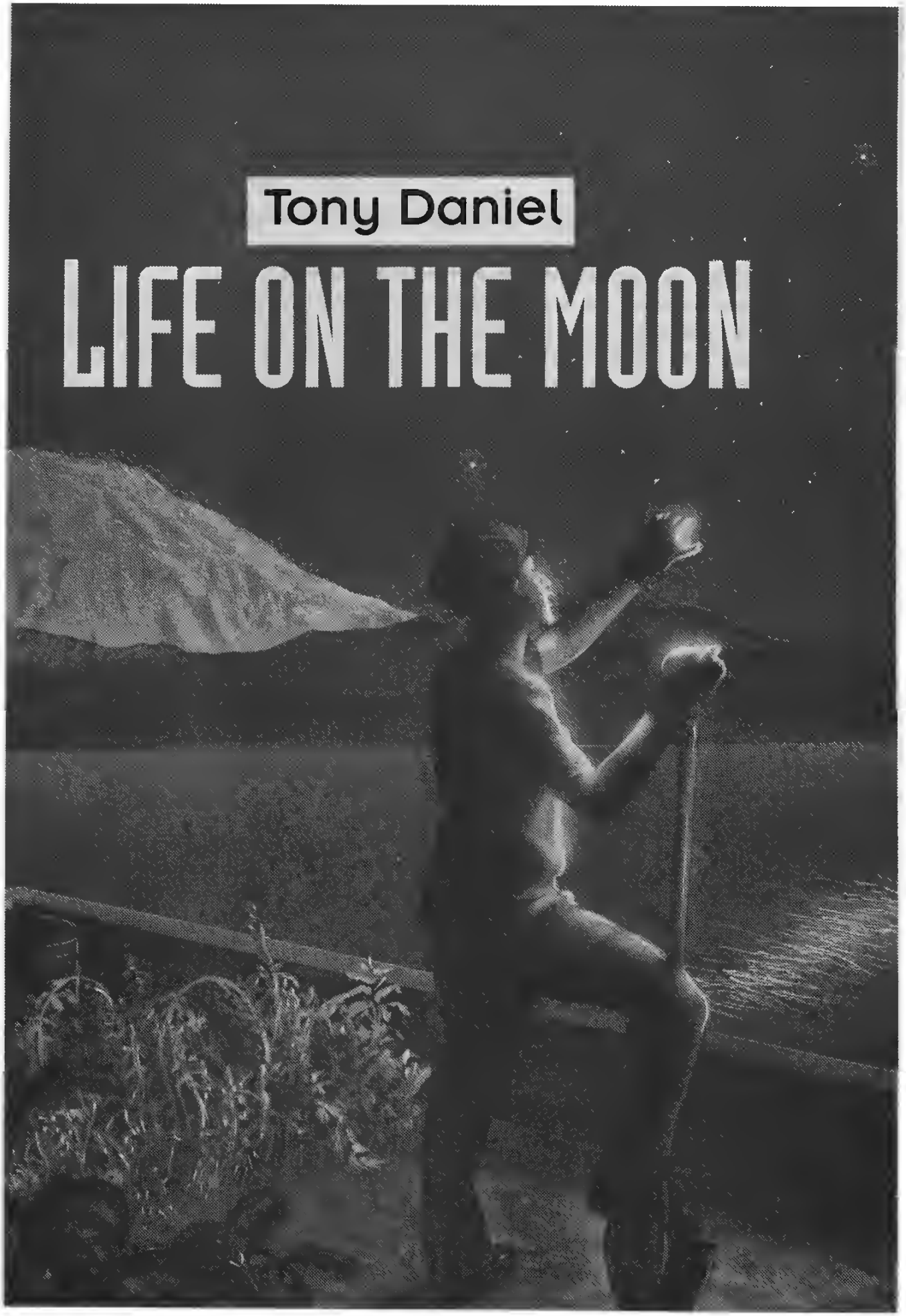
The surface nearby is thin and strong
her skills have brought her this far
she orchestrates the incision at crust level

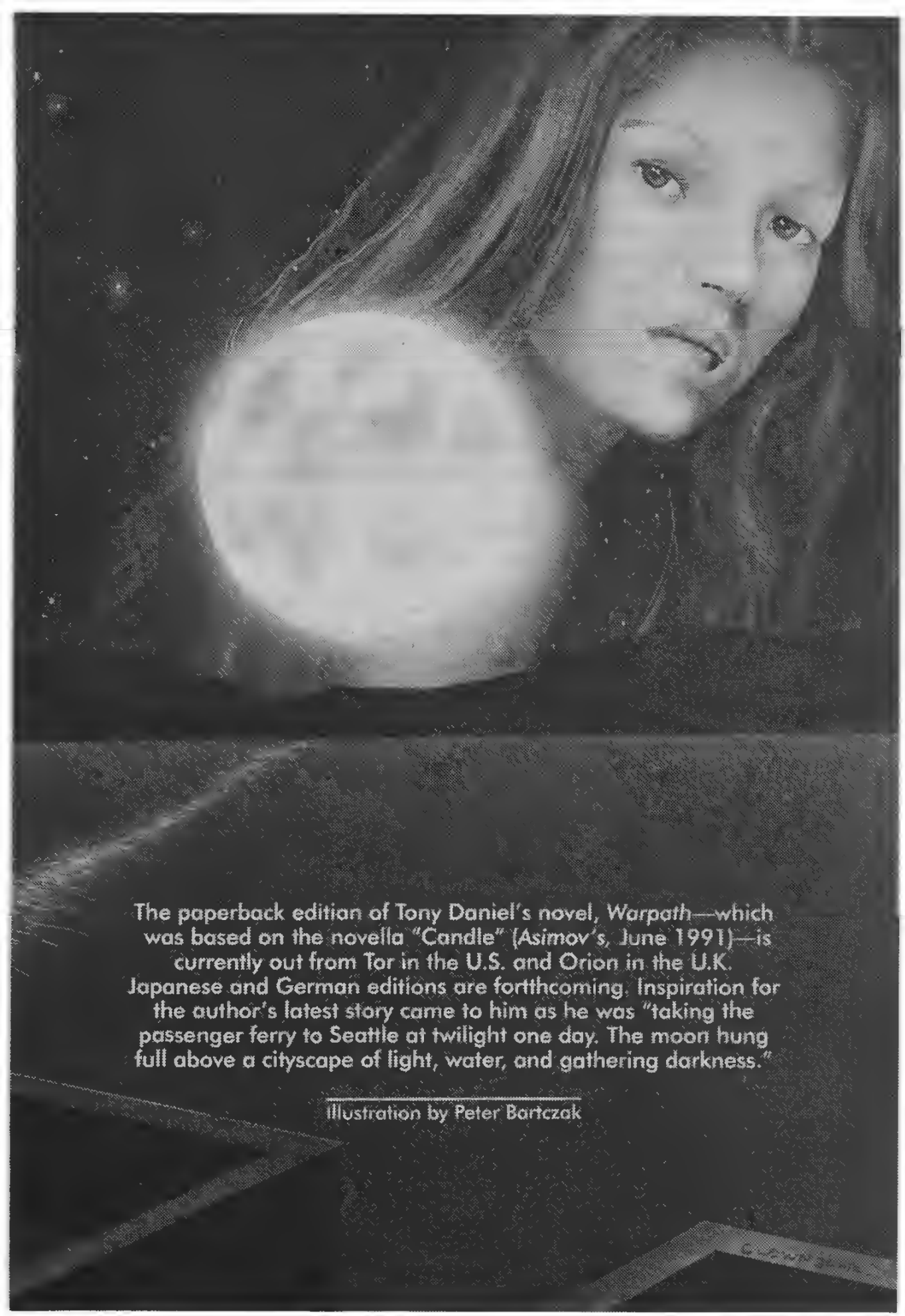
A crane lowers the bathosphere
as it immerses she is seen staring down
preparing again for cold and utter darkness

—Robert Frazier

Tony Daniel

LIFE ON THE MOON





The paperback edition of Tony Daniel's novel, *Warpath*—which was based on the novella "Candle" (*Asimov's*, June 1991)—is currently out from Tor in the U.S. and Orion in the U.K. Japanese and German editions are forthcoming. Inspiration for the author's latest story came to him as he was "taking the passenger ferry to Seattle at twilight one day. The moon hung full above a cityscape of light, water, and gathering darkness."

Illustration by Peter Bartczak

The Big Empty
by Henry Colterman

If I ventured into the Big Empty,
a smaller movement between hard and fast stars,
if I ventured to the moon, and the dust of the moon,
and to those smooth ceramic halls, those lustrous and benign
spaces, or to the evaporated surface,
the empty mineral stretch and score,
would I find you?
Are you still in the valence between spaces? I would kiss the
fall of your hair; I would lie
beside you in the silence,
and trace with my fingertip your lips' surge and fall.
I would pull you gently from the undermass,
the crystal and stone, like a spiderweb from foliage, like
breath from a sleeper.
If I ventured to the Big Empty,
I would never stop looking for you, Nell.

Nell was skinny and wan. Her hair was brown, darkening to black, and her eyes were brown and sad. Henry did not understand why he loved her, for he had always considered himself a shallow man when it came down to it, with a head turned by shallow beauty and flashy teeth and eyes. Nell was a calm, dark pool. She was also probably the greatest artist of her generation, though, and when one had the extraordinary luck to claim such a woman's regard, one made exceptions.

They met at a faculty mixer in St. Louis. Henry was a visiting poet at Washington University's graduate writing program. Nell, already quite famous in her professional circles, had given a lecture that day at the architecture school—a lecture that Henry had studiously avoided. Nell had not read any of Henry's poetry, for that matter, but then few people had. If anything, twenty-first century poets were more obscure and unknown than their predecessors had been.

But both knew the other by reputation, and, being the only people at the mixer who were not involved in the intricacies of academic policy skirmishes, the two of them ended up in a corner, *talking* about corners.

"Why do they have to be ninety degrees?" Henry asked. He leaned against one wall, trying to appear nonchalant, and felt his drink slosh over his wrist. For the first time, Henry regretted that he was not a man brought up to be comfortable on the insides of buildings.

"They don't," Nell replied. "But there are good reasons they mostly are." For some reason, Nell's face seemed lacking in some way, as if the

muscles and tendons were strung out and defined, but weren't really supporting anything of importance. Odd.

"Structural reasons?"

"Why are there *laps*, when we sit down?"

Henry knew then that he was going to like her, despite her peculiar face.

"So we have something to do with our legs, I suppose," he said.

"And to hold cats and children on, too. Function and beauty." Nell smiled, and suddenly Henry understood the reason her face seemed curious and incomplete. It was a superstructure waiting for that smile.

They did not, of course, return to Henry's place and fuck like minks, although by the end of the mixer that was all Henry had on his mind. Instead, Henry asked her to coffee the following afternoon. Nell actually had a scramjet to Berlin scheduled for the early morning, Henry later discovered, but she canceled the flight for the date. Nell understood which situations called for spontaneity, and, being a careful, thoughtful woman, she always made the right moves.

Those first moments were so abstract, urban and—formed, as Henry later recalled them. Like a dance, personifying the blind calls and pediments of nature. That was what it felt like to be alive in the houses of people you didn't really know, of living hazy days in parks and coffee shops and the chambers of the university. Nell and he met the next day for espresso like two ballet dancers executing a maneuver. Touch lightly, exchange, touch, pass, pass, pass.

But something sparked then and there, because, of course, he had asked her to drive out to the Ozarks to see the flaming maples, and Nell had accepted. And in the Ozarks, Henry could become himself, his best self.

Nell had found one of his books, and when they stopped to look at a particularly fine farmhouse amidst crimson and vermilion foliage, she quoted, from memory, his poem about growing up in the country.

They kissed with a careful passion.

From: Living on the Moon
An Essay Concerning Lunar Architectural Possibilities
by Nell Branigan

Lunar architecture will offer many new frontiers for artists, but the old truths must still apply if the edifices of the moon are to be places where people will want to live and work. Lunar architecture must take account of space and form above all. Art is the outward, objective expression of inner, subjective experience. It is the symbol of what it is like to be human.

Consider architecture. What is the great element of architecture? It is not form *alone, for that is the great element of sculpture. We live and work* inside *the architectural sculpture, as well as pondering it from outside. We inhabit its spaces. This is why I say that its greatest elements are both form and space, and the ways the two relate to one another.*

Two years later, Henry published his fifth book to sound reviews and a little more money than he'd expected. On the strength of this, he agreed to move to Seattle for a while to be with Nell, despite the fact that he had no academic appointment there, or prospects for one. They were married in a civil ceremony in the apex of the Smith Tower, a building Nell particularly admired.

And I am a *man* Nell particularly admired, Henry later thought. Perhaps love is not an emotion that is possible for the developed feelings. Perhaps the artist contemplates and symbolizes feeling to such an extent that he or she can't just *have* one after a certain point. Maybe that's why I'm only a good poet, and Nell was a genius. I *feel* too much stuff. Too much goddamn unformed *stuff.*

Yet, Nell had remembered his poem, and, by now, she had read all of his work, and would quote parts of it when she was happy or animated by some idea.

In Seattle, Nell's earthly masterpiece was being built—the Lakebridge Edifice. "Built" was, maybe, not the word for construction these days. "Substantiated" or "Formed" seemed more correct, as the macro and micro machines interacted with the algorithmic plans to produce a structure utterly true to the architect's vision—down to the molecular level.

To achieve such perfection of craft took a little over two years, during which time Nell and Henry shared comfortable apartments on the Alki-Harbor Island Span, a glassy affair of a neighborhood that stretched across Elliott Bay in a flattened arch. Nell thought it crass and atrocious. Henry decided to make the best of things, and planted a garden on the thirty foot long catwalk that opened up from their bedroom. His new book began to take shape as a series of captured moments having to do with plants and growth and getting soil on your pants and hands.

Production and Reproduction
by Henry Colterman

In the nucleus of our home, my wife draws buildings
in concentrated silence, measured pace
as daylight dapples through the walls and ceilings
of our semi-permeable high arch living space.
While I, raised young among the cows and maize,

garden the terrace by my hand and hoe
and fax her conceptions out to their next phase,
she makes our living—and your living too.
Near twilight, I osmose from room to room
feeling vague, enzymatic lust for her
but wait, and clean, and prepensely consume
my supper in the leavings of our birr.
And then she stumbles, blinking, into night
and we opaque the walls to greenhouse light.

I was happy, Henry recalled. I thought I was just getting by, using my garden as a substitute for living in nature, living by nature. But I was truly happy on the Span. Somehow, nature came to *me* there.

Sex was never Nell's strong point. She was awkward and seemed perpetually inexperienced, but she was passionate and thoughtful. Her sexuality was as well-formed, balanced, and beautiful as her buildings. But it lacked something. That something was, of course, what Nell put into her *work,* Henry knew. Artless ardor. Novelty and insight. The secret ingredient of genius.

Yet Henry did not mind. For she loved him, he knew, and respected his work, his long silences, his gazing off into nowhere, his sometimes childish glee at what must have appeared to her to be nothing at all.

And so they lived and grew together during the making of the Lakebridge Edifice. Or perhaps I grew *around* Nell, Henry later considered, like wisteria around wrought iron. Nell didn't change, but she was good support, and did not mind being covered over in spots.

From: Living on the Moon
An Essay Concerning Lunar Architectural Possibilities
by Nell Branigan

So what does this tell us about a lunar architecture? Only that space and form still apply to our constructions, because humans *still apply. The moon is perhaps one of the oldest constants in the making of this feeling of being alive that all art expresses. Women know this quite literally, but men know it just as well in a hundred biological rhythms that go back to our animal experience of the rise and fall of the Earth's tide.*

Yet we will no longer be down on Earth, looking up at the moon. We will be on the moon, looking up at the Earth. The old movements and spaces will not apply. Or rather, they will not apply in the same ways. I imagine that this disruption of feeling *will be far more upsetting to people*

than the change in gravity or the physical necessities of existence on the lunar surface.

I conceive of a lunar architecture that would mitigate this disruption, and yet, if it were possible, provide us with new *forms and spaces to reflect our new relationship with the mother planet. Like a child who has left the nest, lunar architecture must look back with fondness, but forward with imagination and resolve.*

What are the actualities of such an architecture? What sorts of cities ought we to build on the moon?

When the Lakebridge Edifice was complete, it was clear that Nell was a major artist of her generation. Even Henry, who had been an intimate part of the design and construction of the structure, was stunned when he first saw it complete and revealed, one morning near sunrise.

He'd been out on his terrace, weeding the tomatos. Even with a plethora of soil emulsifiers, regulatory agents, and hunter-killer insect robots, weeds still grew. The problem was one of recognition, for life was life, no matter how irritataing the form it took. Henry had not been able to sleep the night before, while Nell had slept like a log, her labors in Seattle nearly completed. Their settled life was about to end, Henry knew, and with it the feeling of contentment and regularity that he hadn't known since his days growing up on his parents' little farm near Dalton, Georgia.

He'd gone out onto the terrace, because that was the place that smelled and felt most strongly of the old farm, particularly his father's prized tomato garden. It should. He'd worked to get just that *flavor* out of the thirty feet, even sacrificing yield to do it. This was the way it had been.

And, once again, he was going to leave it and lose it.

Henry began to weed despondently, while dawn turned the black sky gray, as it did nearly every morning in Seattle. Except. Except that now there was something new that made the gray sky—not brighter—but *lighter*. The sun came up, and shone on the northeast corner of the Lakebridge Edifice.

The problem wasn't new, Nell had told him. It was the age-old renovation question of what to do with low ceilings. In Seattle, the clouds were often low, and the sky was frequently mean. It sometimes made you feel compressed, made your life seem squat and set. Yet, there was the water of lake and ocean nearby, and, when the clouds would permit, mountains on all sides.

Lakebridge was a solution to those days when the mountains didn't come out, and the Sound and lakes were dishwater dull. It did not attempt to reverse those conditions, but to provide a new experience. It was a complex of different spaces, Nell called them. They couldn't properly be

viewed as distinct buildings. Too many connections, suggested and literal. The complex partially encompassed Lake Union, on the northeast side of downtown, and seemed to be the very evaporation and condensation of lake water into the sky—the cycle of liquid, vapor, and the solid apparitions of clouds in an ascending order that spired out at three-quarter miles. And yet, this was far from all that the complex suggested. There was a colorful marina, a hoverport, residential and business sections intertwining like striated muscles. The structure was organic, alive, useful, *because* it was art first, because the craft was part of the makeup of its living form.

Henry found himself drawing in his breath at the beauty of what his wife had conceived. Then a small hand wiped the sweat from his brow, and Nell wound her arm around him, and crooked herself under his shoulder.

"Do you think it's pretty?" she asked shyly. Henry knew that this was no put-on. Nell was, herself, constantly surprised by what her gift allowed her to do.

"You done yourself proud," Henry whispered, and Nell hugged him tighter.

"I'm glad you like it," she said. "That means more to me than anything." Henry looked into her hazel eyes and felt pure love. Like the love he felt for the Earth, for the way things grew and changed. Her eyes were the color of good fertile soil. They were the color of fine wood and thick prairie sage. He kissed her lightly on the forehead, and she drew him down to her lips. Good. Right. Beautiful.

They made love in the terrace garden, as Henry had always wanted to. If there was any artistry in sex, they caught it that day, twisting amid the tomato plants. Sex was supposedly the pattern and rhythm that the sonnet followed, but Henry was convinced theirs was itself the symbol of a sonnet, the gift that art was giving back to the world for giving it someone like Nell Branigan.

Henry made love to Nell with abandon. Her responding movements dug her deeper into the dirt of the terrace, until she was partially buried, and Henry was lowering himself deeper than soil level with each thrust. Her hands smeared his back and sides with loam, and their kisses began to get muddy.

Before he came, Nell turned him over into the depression they had carved, and, sitting on him, wiped herself clean with tomato vines. It was the most erotic thing Henry had ever seen. He pushed up into her. She caressed his face with hands smelling of vegetable tang, and rubbed her clit with the pith and juice of his crushed plants. Henry felt himself on the verge but held back, held back. He tried to reach up into Nell

with *feeling,* with an understanding and admiration for her—the woman in her, the artist, the subtle combination of the two that was her soul.

When they were spent, they collapsed in the garden. Henry spoke on some nearby heating elements, and fell fast asleep, his love in his arms.

Two weeks later, Henry was offered a visiting professorship at Stanford that would not involve teaching, but only a bit of consulting work with graduate students in writing. It was a dream slot, lucrative and freeing. Henry suspected the offer was partly due to the reflected glamour of his association with Nell, for Nell and the Lakebridge Edifice had made the opening screen of the general newsource *Virtual* with the heading "Architectural Renaissance Woman." Nell was, of course, receiving project proposals from right and left.

"It appears I can live practically anywhere and do my work," she said. When Henry told her about the Stanford opportunity, she encouraged him to accept. They prepared to move to San Francisco in the autumn.

From: Living on the Moon
An Essay Concerning Lunar Architectural Possibilities
by Nell Branigan

I conceive of structures that create a human space within themselves, and yet are not closed off from the grandeur of the setting—the wonder of where the people are and what they are doing. This is the moon, and we have come to this new world to live! We must take into account Earthrise and moon mountain vistas. I imagine an architecture that moves and accommodates itself to take advantage of the best synergies and juxtaposition of the landscape.

And yet the forms that we conceive to give us the spaces that will move us must, themselves, be beautiful.

What follows is merely my idea of such an architecture. It is intended as an acorn, and not as the oaktree entire. Space is broad and empty, and where there are humans there will be places humans live. And where there are places to live, there will be architects.

Henry was writing a poem about briarpatches when Nell came in to tell him about the moon. He knew it must be important, otherwise she would never have interrupted him at his work. In those days, his hair was closely cropped, and Nell enjoyed running her fingers through its crispness. She did so this time, but half-heartedly—more of a swat—and then sat down across the table from him.

"Dobrovnik interfaxed in yesterday, full virtual," she said.

Dobrovnik was a partner in Nell's firm. He had given up his own design

work to serve as principal agent and negotiator for the other partners—most importantly, Nell.

"That must have been incredibly expensive," Henry replied, still a little blank from having been yanked out of the poem. "It must have been important?"

"Yes. I've been offered a wonderful project."

"Really?"

"*Really* wonderful."

"That's great."

Nell slumped, and looked around the room. Henry was not used to such odd body language from her. He forced thoughts of thorns and briars from his mind, and concentrated.

"So," he said. "You aren't going to be able to go to San Francisco? Is that it?"

"That's part of it."

Something else, but Nell was being very quiet. "Nell, you know I support you completely."

"I know, Henry." She sobbed. *Nell* sobbed. "My Henry."

"Nell, what is it?"

"The Subcommittee on Exploration has approved my proposal for a lunar colony."

"The *United Nations* General Assembly?" Nell nodded. "Nell, that's amazing news!"

And she was crying. Henry was entirely nonplussed.

"I have to *go*," Nell said. "I have to go to the moon for five years. Maybe longer."

Henry stood up, sat down. San Francisco. He pictured San Francisco's gardens and fogs, its graceful spans and temperate clime. But fog. And more fog, like dead vines. *Un*dead vines. Covering, obscuring, *eating* the city away, fog, until there was nothing, nothing but depthless gray.

"You can come, Henry. That would all be part of the arrangement. They'll pay your way, and more."

"To the moon?"

"Yes."

All he could picture was a blank. A blank expanse.

"But there's nothing there!"

"There *will* be. We are going to build it."

"No, there's no . . . air. No manure. No briarpatches."

"I know. I understood that from the moment Dobrovnik told me about the offer, and I truly began to consider what it would involve to actually *do* it."

Henry felt a trickle of sweat down his forehead. Where had that come

from? Nell was too far away to wipe it. He pawed it off, continued down his face with his hand, and kneaded his own shoulder.

"Are you going to accept?"

"I don't know. To build a city, practically from scratch—it's the chance of the century for an architect." Nell wiped her tears, sat up straight. "I want you with me, Henry."

Did she? Or was she just doing the right thing? What was *he,* after all, when compared with her art? Had Nell ever really cared for him at all, except in the abstract? Jesus, he felt like Rick at the end of *Casablanca,* letting Ilsa go off with Victor Lazlo. What in God's name had gotten into him? Why was he thinking like this? Was he that jealous of her gift? Of her fucking acclaim? He *loved* Nell. He loved Nell, and he wanted to be with her, too.

But didn't she know what it would do to him? To *his* work? The moon. The bone-dead moon.

"I have to think. I don't know if I can go with you. I have to think."

And, as always, Nell knew that it was time to leave him alone and let him do so. She had perfect instincts about such things. Or perhaps it was art. Henry could never tell the difference as far as Nell was concerned.

She Hangs Mute and Bright
by Henry Colterman

Blank hole, like a fresh cigarette scar
I like the stars better; they don't
care or not care, but the moon
doesn't care and makes you think
she does. It is the light, I think,
the queered shadows, as subtle as lips,
the tease of incomplete revelation.

I have climbed up to small branches
on full moon nights and pressed
my face to the dark
while the wind chapped my eyes open.
I was without tears,
as empty as an orbit,
but she did not fill me.
She moved on.

She never lived.
She cannot die.

She hangs mute and bright.
I do not understand the moon.

Henry did not decide that day, or the next. He rented a car the following morning and went for a drive into the Cascade Mountains. There was a chilly rain above four thousand feet, and the drying elements in the roads steamed in long, thin lines up, up toward the passes.

Henry stopped at a waterfall, and stood a long time in the mist. There was no thought in his head for several minutes, and then he became aware that he had been tesselating the fall between being a single, stationary entity and a torrential intermingling of chaotic patterns.

I ought to make a poem about this, he thought. But no words came. Just the blank stare of nature, incomprehensible. One or many, it didn't matter. Henry had almost turned to go when the sun broke out from behind the clouds, and shattered the falls, and the surrounding mist, into prismatic hues.

This is as loud as the water, Henry thought. *This* is what the water is saying. It is talking about the *sun*. The possibility of sunlight.

The light stayed only for a moment, and then was gone, but Henry had his poem. In an instant, I can have a poem, Henry thought, but I look at the moon, and I think about living there—and nothing comes. *Nothing*. I need movement and life. I cannot work with only dust. I am a poet of nature, of life. My work will die on the moon. There isn't any life there.

He must stay.

But Nell.

What would the Earth be like without Nell? Their love had not been born in flames, but it had grown warmer and warmer, like coals finding new wood and slowly bringing it to the flash point. Were they burning yet? Yes. Oh, yes.

"I have to have life for my work," he told her when he returned. "I can't work up there."

"Henry, I'll stay—"

"No."

"There must be a way," she whispered. Her words sounded like the falling of distant rain.

"No."

He must stay, and Nell must go. To the moon.

The preparations were enormous, and Nell did not leave for five more months. They lived in Seattle, but Henry saw very little of her during that time. He was lucky to spend one night a week with her.

Nell tried to make their time together meaningful; Henry could tell she was working hard at it. But now there was The Project—The Project,

always hulking over her mind like an eclipse. During their last week together, Henry called up the plans, the drawings and algorithms that had won the commission, for the first time, to see what was taking his love away.

As usual, the blueprints communicated little to him, despite the time Nell had spent teaching him the rudiments of envisioning structures from them. The three dimensional CAD perspectives were better, but, whether there was some mental block operating in his head, or the fact that the perspectives were idealized and ultimately out of their otherworldly context, Henry could not see what the fuss was over. Just buildings. Only another city. Why not just build it in Arizona or something and *pretend* it was the moon? Why not—

Stop kidding yourself. Nell was going. He was staying here.

Nell spent her last four days on Earth with Henry. At this time, a little of the passion returned to their love. It was ragged and hurried, but the immediacy of their predicament added a fury to their sex, so that it blazed like blown coals.

Nell left on the Tuesday shuttle from SeaTac. Henry had thought that he would not see it off, but found himself getting up and getting ready long before Nell had to go. They drove to the airport in silence. Nell would take an orbital scramjet to Stevenson Station, geosynchronous over North America, then depart on the weekly moon run on Thursday.

Their final kiss was passionate and complete. The desperation of the previous week was gone, and in its place was a timeless togetherness, as if they always had and always would be sharing that kiss. And Henry understood, in the throes of that kiss, that this timelessness totally encompassed his desire, past and future. I mate for life, Henry thought, and I have found my mate.

And then the scramjet carried Henry's love away.

From: Living on the Moon
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by Nell Branigan

My artistic model for this city is the living cell.

I envision smooth, warm walls curving to low arched ceilings, whose opacity will change with the changing light and landscape. I imagine the environmental support systems and operating machinery of the cell showing bluntly here and there, but incorporated—literally—into the function and form of the whole, just as mitochondria and chloroplasts are in living cells.

I imagine a city of light and subtle colors, stretching out and up in

graceful curves, runners, and points, stretching like a neuron, with neurotransmitters sparking off the end of dendrites and axons, sparking back to the Earth—or outward, into the greater emptiness beyond.

Mornings were not so bad. Henry had not taken the Stanford position after all, but had moved back to Georgia, to a log cabin that had once been his grandfather's hobby project. He scratched out poems, and within six months had another book ready. He was mildly famous now—or so he supposed, for he had stopped paying attention to such things—and the book brought an unprecedented advance. For the first time in his career, Henry would not need to teach or live off of one grant or another. And Nell regularly sent home an enormous sum from her paycheck, since she had very little to spend it on, and wanted him to use whatever he might need of it.

The Project would provide him a trip to the moon and back once a year. Henry counted the days until the trip with alternating hope and trepidation. It wouldn't be the same as being together with Nell. It might be worse than not being with her at all. He couldn't say when, but after a while he realized that he had decided not to go.

Nights were terrible. Nell would call often, and once a week use the full-virtual interfax. Henry imagined his grandfather coming back to life and entering the cabin—only to find the cabin haunted by a ghost. Nell's form moved and spoke with Henry on these weekly visitations, and then was gone. But the short transmission delay was enough to tell him it was not Nell, there, on Earth, in Georgia. He could not smell her hair nor kiss her face. They could only stare into one another's eyes over three hundred and eighty-four thousand kilometers.

Henry prided himself on not breaking down in front of Nell, but some nights he stayed awake, crying until morning. Especially during the full moon. It hung oppressively in the dark, shone as if it had reason, as if it had passion. But all of its brightness was just a reflection. The moon was distant and dead, only a virtual world, an apparition of meaning, tricking the eye. Henry tried to be brave, to not pull the curtains on it, but many times he could not stand the light, and yanked them closed.

But he forced himself to watch the news reports, and follow the more accessible architectural journals. Progress on the moon was quick, but there was an enormous amount of work to be done in transforming the pre-existing colony into a real city, with the attendant support structures and contingencies for change. It soon became obvious that the Project was going to run into delays, perhaps lengthy ones.

But the city was going to be built. Lower-cost trips up and down Earth's gravity well, and the new micro construction techniques had

made the economics of low-gravity manufacturing feasible, and the communications and transportation base the moon was already providing meant the colony had long been breaking even financially. The moon had begun to turn a profit. And soon, skilled and semi-skilled workers would be needed, by the thousands. The moon was going to become many an emigrant's destination.

So they were building a city, both for those already there, and for those who would come. Sophisticated systems had to grow, and grow together precisely. Changes must be made to accommodate small miscalculations or the random aberrations of molecules. Myriad design problems must be met and mastered, and Nell had to be out on the surface, constantly consulting with contractors and crafters as to changes and adaptations, or inside watching command and control simulations in virtual. Yet enclosures of unprecedented physical security were being built, for paper-thin walls could shield against vacuum and meteor strike. And, with one sixth the gravity, there were long arches, massive lintels, never possible on Earth. A city of cathedrals, it seemed to Henry.

As Nell's city took shape, Henry began truly to see the magnitude and wonder of the work his wife had envisioned. Yet still, it was the moon, and the only life was human life—human life on a grand scale, he must admit. But no wild waterfalls. No briarpatches giving life to form, bringing form to life.

And then, one day before Nell's weekly visit, Henry received a signal from Lunar Administration.

He immediately knew something was wrong, for this was a day that Nell expected to be too busy even to call.

He flicked his virtual fax to full interactive, expecting Nell to explain to him what the big deal was.

Instead, a chubby, professionally dressed woman appeared before him.

"Dr. Colterman?"

"Just Mister." Henry blinked to see her. There was dust in the room, and some particles danced brightly in her image, as they might in sunlight.

"I'm Elmira Honner."

"You're—" Henry vaguely remembered the name.

"Supervisor of the Lunar Project."

"Ah. Nell's boss. Yes. What?" He realized he sounded curt. Why was this woman calling him in Georgia, reminding him of the moon?

"I'm afraid I have bad news."

Oh, God. The vacuum. The lifeless stretches. But maybe not—

"Your wife was killed this afternoon, Mr. Colterman. Nell Branigan is dead."

She had been killed in a construction accident while supervising the foundations for a communications center. The micro machines had thought she was debris, and had—almost instantaneously—disassembled and transported Nell and two others, molecule by molecule, to be spread out over a twenty kilometer stretch. The algorithm that had caused the harm had not been one of Nell's, but a standard Earth program modified by one of the contractors without previous clearance. The glitch was based on the fact that the moon's surface was lifeless. The algorithm hadn't *needed* to recognize life on the lunar surface before, had done its job in directing the micro construction elements, and so the bug had gone undetected. Until now.

Henry said nothing. He bowed his head, and let pain slosh over him, into him, like the tide. Nell, dead on the dead moon. Nell.

Honner waited a respectful moment. Henry was vaguely aware that she hadn't signed off.

"Mr. Colterman?" she said. "Mr. Colterman, there *is* something else."

Henry's eyes began to tear, but he was not crying yet. Brief transmission delay. Three hundred eighty-four thousand kilometers. Not yet. Not even grief was faster than light. "What?" he said. "What else do you want?"

"Your wife left something. Something for you. It's on the edge of a secluded crater, some kilometers away from the colony."

Something? Henry could not think. "What is it?"

"We're not exactly sure. We thought you could, perhaps, tell us."

"Yes?"

Honner seemed more uncomfortable now, unsure of herself, and not used to the feeling.

"You'll have to *come*, Mr. Colterman. It isn't something that even full virtual can really . . . *encompass*. Also, we're not exactly sure what to *do* about this thing—"

"No."

"Mr. Colterman, sir, respectfully, I—"

"Don't you see that I *can't?* Not now. There's nothing—" His voice broke into a sob. He didn't care. He was crying.

"Mr. Colterman, I'm sorry. Mr. Colterman, Nell told me she wanted you to come and see it. She said it was the only way she could ever get you to visit the moon."

"She told *you* that?"

"I was her friend."

"She wants me to come to the moon."

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Colterman. If there's anything we can do—"

"Nell wants me to come to the moon."

He spent most of the scramjet ride to Stevenson Station gazing numbly

at the Earth, and most of the lunar transport time working and reworking a poem. He called it "The Big Empty," and it was done just before the transport landed.

Honner met him at the dock, and together they took a skimmer to the crater where Nell had left . . . whatever it was that remained. Henry watched the gray-black dust skirt underneath the skimmer, and thought: that is Nell. Now this dust has a name.

When they got to the crater, Henry did not at first understand what he was seeing. Honner suggested that they debark, and they both donned the thin-skinned surface suits that Henry had seen in virtual, and never really believed would be any protection. Apparently they were. He walked to the edge of the crater, to a beacon that was flashing faintly against the black sky. The beacon was attached to a greenish stone, with one side chiseled flat. On that face was the simple inscription.

For Henry

He gazed out over the crater, down its bumps and declivities, trying to discern—

"It isn't actually a crater," Honner said. Her voice seemed pitched for the distance she stood away from him, and it took Henry a moment to realize his headgear had some sort of sophisticated transceiver embedded in it. There was, of course, no air here.

"What do you mean?"

"We've begun a search of her notes, but so far we have no explanation. Nell . . . *grew* this, as far as we can tell."

"Grew?"

"In a manner of speaking. There was no crater here before. Also, it changes. We don't *think* it's getting *bigger,* but we do have our concerns. As you're aware, micro instantiation poses certain risks—" Honner appeared to have run out of tactful ways of expressing her misgivings. She came to stand beside Henry at the crater's edge. "It seems to be powered by Earthshine, if you can believe such a thing—"

Nell *grew* this. The words resonated in Henry's mind. And then he saw it for what it was. Portions and rows. The undulations of corn and wheat, the tangle of tomatos, the wispy irony of weeds, here and there. Not a copy, not even an imitation.

For it was made from the rocks and dust of the moon, inhabited by micro construction machines, and animated by Nell's algorithms. Nell's vision. Nell. An expression. An evocation. Of course, of course. Life on the moon.

"It's a garden."

"What? I don't see that."

"It's a sculpture. No. It's a garden. I think people are meant to go down in there."

"I still don't see—"

Art is the symbol of life, and the embodiment of the life it symbolizes, Nell had said. This was not a real garden, any more than the painting of a tomato was a real tomato. But it was the way gardens *felt*. And if anybody knows how gardens feel, what it is like to lie down among the tomatoes, it is me and Nell, Henry thought. Oh yes, a garden.

Henry touched the carved letters on the green stone. "Yes, I think it's pretty, Nell," he said.

Life on the Moon
by Henry Colterman

After I ventured into the Big Empty,
a smaller movement between hard and fast stars,
after I ventured to the moon, and the dust of the moon,
and to those smooth ceramic halls, those lustrous and benign
spaces, and to the evaporated surface,
the empty mineral stretch and score,
I could not find you.
You moved on.

Yet you are still there.
You are in the valence between spaces.
I cannot kiss the fall of your hair; I cannot lie
beside you in the silence.
Not yet.
You hang mute and bright.
You rise gently from the undermass,
the crystal and stone, like a sleeper
half-waking, then back to dreams
of the moon, subtle as lips,
now harsh and warm as breath.
Rise and fall.

Nell, for love,
you have given the moon seasons. ●

The answers to some of life's greatest mysteries: UFO's; FTL; and clown make-up, may be lurking right under our . . .

NOSES

Eliot Fintushel

Illustratian by Peter Bartczak



I'm in the grease paint alley at a stop in Peoria when an old pal of mine peeks in, smelling of Jim Beame and mildew. We used to do walkabouts for the Cole Brothers, town to town, till he started acting funny, and he kind of drifted away. It happens. He found himself a cracker of a partner, I'd heard, and started in to doing gigs in the boonies.

"Take a load off, you old hack," I tell him. "How's your nose?"

Suddenly he looks like he is passing a gallstone. His face turns grey and he sits down on my trunk. You'd think it was his mother's casket.

"What's up?" I says, and I put down my paw full of greasy kleenex and powder.

He does me a long, soulful take, which used to be his trademark move, and then he starts in to talking about the old days, slow and careful, like deposing to a copper.

This is the story he tells me:

We used to joke noses, my partner Tim and me, before I knew the score. Say, there's Tim picking through butts and bottles on the floor, and he'd say, "I lost my nose."

"You're lucky," I'd say. "Mine's melted."

Or else it would be, "Can you lend me your nose tomorrow?"

Or, "Damn! I left my nose in the can!"

Well, if you ask me, Tim didn't even *need* a nose, but maybe just a spot of rouge on the tip of his schnoz. He was a natural-born *Auguste,* six foot two and skinny, with a face like a harvest moon. Me, I drag my five-six from gig to gig with a lachrymose mug an inch of grease paint won't prettify. My nose *made* me. I'm too short to be normal and too tall to be funny. Besides, I sweat too much, and when I sweat, I stink. Not a favorable configuration for the buffoon trade.

Couple summers back, we were doing our little dirt show in Bliss, New York, in back of the Baptist Bible School. It was the third gig of the day, and I was so sweaty, I could hardly see; the makeup was smearing under my eyes and burning.

"Why do we have to do Bliss?" I asked him. "I hate Bliss. They've got no stage. They've got no hall. They've got no money. And the laughs cost plenty; these rubes are not subtle."

"Because that's where I got my start. It's hard for me to tell them no. See that orchard? I taught myself to juggle there in 1973; I flashed a cascade of three Ida Reds, and decided to be a clown, to travel, me and my nose, my red nose, wherever it would take me. It all started in that orchard, brother. These townies were my first audience."

"He said that?" I ask my old pal. "He said he got his start in an orchard?"

"Yeah," he says, "juggling, like I said. Why?"

"*I* started like that," I says, "in an orchard. But not juggling. What about you?"

"No," he says, "it wasn't like that for me. I went to the Ringling Brothers school in Venice, Florida," he says. "What's the difference?"

"Did he say what happened in the orchard?"

"No. What do you mean? He juggled there, like I said."

I reach over by the mirror to pick up my little case. I keep mine in a case, a tight little case like what you keep a wedding ring in; you know, the kind that snaps open and snaps shut with a sharp click. I blow off the powder. I open it up and show him my nose.

"I bet your partner didn't have a nose like *this* one," I tell him. He gives my baby a sly peek and then slides those beady peepers back to his shoes.

"What about you?" I says, still sizing him up. "Did they teach you how to make them at Venice, Florida? Wax? Papier-mâché? Sponge balls? Or what?"

He's not buying it. He's not interested. "Okay," I says, "finish your story. Tell me what happened in Bliss."

Well, I hated the sun. I was so sweaty that day in Bliss that when I tapped Tim's shoulder for the blowoff and jumped into his arms—"Eek! A mouse!"—he couldn't hold me. He shifted and squirmed, gagging it up the whole time, making like it was part of the *lazzo,* but I was too slick. Finally, I went down, and he went down on top of me. Thank God, *my* nose was gummed on tight, but while I was sliding down, my fright wig snagged Tim's nose, and it shot off into space like a champagne cork.

"The old *lazzo!*" I says.

"No," he says, "it wasn't. I know what you're talking about. Tim was doing that one, in fact, on that very tour. The old mime trick. He'd make it look like the nose was flying away from him, pulling at his hand. Then he'd have to push it back onto his face. Not very effective, in my opinion."

"I knew it," I says, getting the picture. "The old chestnut, the runaway schnoz!" Only it hadn't been a *lazzo,* not in Bliss *and not before that, either.* But I figure my pal is still in the dark.

"In Bliss," he says, "that's not what happened. There, Tim wasn't doing it. It just got pulled *off.*"

"Go on," I says.

The fall was a big success—they howled—but Tim scrambled to his feet and started screaming. "Hey!" he said. "Stop that rube!" he said. They thought it was part of the act, but I could see my man was strictly

in a panic. Then I saw his raw cabonza; it was red and pasty where the spirit gum held a patch of enamel from the rim of that famous proboscis of his. He was staring out toward a spot at the edge of the field; this little gal in a raggedy smock was running toward the road. "She's got my nose!"

My fanny was still in the clover when Tim bolted for the pickup. We were using it for a backdrop—the truck, I mean, not my fanny; there was a big, blue tarp gaffer-taped over the driver's side. Tim ducked under it and pulled the door open. He started the engine right up—a miracle—and jammed the truck into gear. Then he swung around and headed toward the girl.

"Hey! You can't drive stick!" I was dodging divots and mud spray, but I leapt onto the truck bed. The audience loved it. They were convinced that the little girl was a ringer. It was absolutely the best blowoff those hicks had ever seen!

We were bouncing over spalled concrete on dead, rusted shocks. I crawled to the front of the truck bed and tore through the tarp, grabbing onto the side window. "What's the big deal?" I shouted. "You can get another nose."

"You don't get it!" He was crying and wheezing, trying to understand the stick shift without losing sight of the girl. "I'm nothing without my nose! Nothing!"

We turned onto the road and saw the girl up ahead, making for an apple orchard on the other side. Tim floored it. I hung onto the tarp for dear life. We followed right up behind her into the orchard, along the windbreak, and into this broad stream. He was trying to charge across it in my half-ton, which stalled out, which I knew it had to, half way across.

Tim jumped out and dashed after this girl. I was at his heels. "Jeepers, Tim, you've lost your nose before!"

"Yeah, but I always got it *back!* If she makes off with it, I'm finished!"

"You're not gonna hurt her, Tim?" I begged him. I kept falling and skinning my knees. My baggy pants were soaked and ripped—and I can't sew worth spit, how do you like *that?* I could see that the girl was having a rough time too, poor kid, falling and scrambling across the stream.

Tim shouted back at me, "There's gotta be a ship in there. She's taking it back!"

I was running out of breath, hanging onto Tim's shoulder as we caromed around plum trees on the other side of the stream. "Timbo, it's just a *nose.*"

"No,"—We almost had her!—"*your* nose is just a nose!" He had a handful of her smock, but it ripped, and she pulled away. She scrambled up a little hill and was out of sight for a second. Tim vaulted over the rise. "No! God, *no!* Don't leave me! Don't leave me to die!"

I followed him. There was a sort of cave, the size of a brick oven, on the other side. Tim was sticking his head and arms into it, and he was crying. "Come back! Come back!" I saw him get hold of the girl's feet and pull them out of the hole. Then her torso showed, all dirty and scraped, and her arms, but she pawed that hole to try and stay in it.

At this point, I stop listening. I've heard things like this from other poor slobs. It's always in an orchard. It has nothing to do with *me*. I smack on some more Albolene and squeegee the rest of my face off while he's talking. I'm packing up. I'm shipping out. I'm waiting for him to get off my trunk so I can get the show on the road. I got an itinerary to follow, and it ain't mine to change. He's blabbing away, staring at his dogs. I can tell you the rest of what he said:

I tried to pull Tim off her, but he pushed me away. Then he threw the girl to the ground. She was all out of breath and staring up at us like we wanted to do something real bad to her. She was wearing the nose. "Don't hurt me!" she said. "I didn't mean to steal nothing!"

"I know," Tim said. "It *rode* you. Just like it's been riding me. Only, after awhile, you don't know nothing else. You can't *do* nothing else. It's bored with me, I guess, but I'm not gonna let it go!" He grabbed her wrist then, and pulled her to her feet. He crooked her arm behind her back so she couldn't go anywhere.

But when he reached for the nose, it snapped away. Just like that. It snapped off her smooth, young face and rolled through the opening into the hill. The mound shuddered. Then it collapsed, closing up the cave. Then it trembled some more and started cracking open at the top. Me, I ran for the trees, but Tim stayed put, frozen, panicked. The kid was trapped in his arms.

I'm telling you now, this little torpedo of a *ship* come rising out of that hill—up smooth at first, like a periscope—and it was filled with red noses. It had a big, curved window that they crowded into. They were peeping out at us through those tiny nostril holes, as if we were zoo animals. Then there was a roar—not a big one—like the crowd yokking it up at the Bliss Baptist Bible School, no louder, and they shot into the sky, leaving a smell of burnt oil and ozone.

The little girl tore herself away and raced back toward the stream, wailing. Nobody chased her.

I ran to Tim. I couldn't stop shaking. "I didn't see that! I didn't see *anything*."

"Of course not. Who'd believe it?" His face was white. There was no feeling left in him. He followed me back to the road like a zombie.

Not long after that, Tim disappeared, and I had to work up a solo

show. I don't use makeup any more. It's a class act, educational, no clown stuff. And I don't like to talk about noses.

"Well," he says, doing me another one of his long takes, "do you think I'm nuts?"

"The truth?" I says, playing it safe. "I think you had it right the first time. You didn't see a thing."

He nods. We exchange pleasantries. He says thank you, and he's about to take his mildew and his class act—*educational!*—out of the tent and back into the streets of Peoria, like someone who's just gotten the bum's rush. Between you and me, at this point, I can't figure what to think. Obviously, he has had some kind of extreme reaction, but I am not in a position to help.

Then he stops, like something's eating him, and he does me his sadsack take once more—number three—an exit tag, I figure. "Let me see that nose one last time, pal, would you?" he says.

That's when I get it.

"You son of a *bitch,*" I says, and I give him a shove. He falls back onto the trunk. His shoulders are scrunched up to his ears and he's holding his dukes in front of that ugly puss of his like he's ready for my sockdolager.

"I know what you come for," I says. "Venice, Florida, my ass! That wasn't your partner's nose popped away. It was *yours!* Wasn't it?"

He tries to break past me to the mirror, where my nose is sitting in the little case, but I'm too fast for him.

"You almost had me, you bastard," I says. "Nice patter, but a little weak on the blowoff. Now *you* blow!"

"It'll happen to you," he says. "It'll *leave* you, just like mine left me, and then what'll you do, wise guy?"

"You're nuts," I says. "I'm showing my nose the goddamn world! We're doing the Edinburgh Fringe next month. What do you think of *that?*"

"You better steer clear of orchards," he says, and he blows.

Well, the road crew is fixing to strike the tent. I only have a few minutes left to load up my trunk and make the train for Chicago, where my nose wants to check out American jazz. What it comes down to, like I said, is that that guy's troubles have nothing to do with *me.* I use plenty of spirit gum, you can bet, and in *my* life, nothing's leaving *nobody.* ●



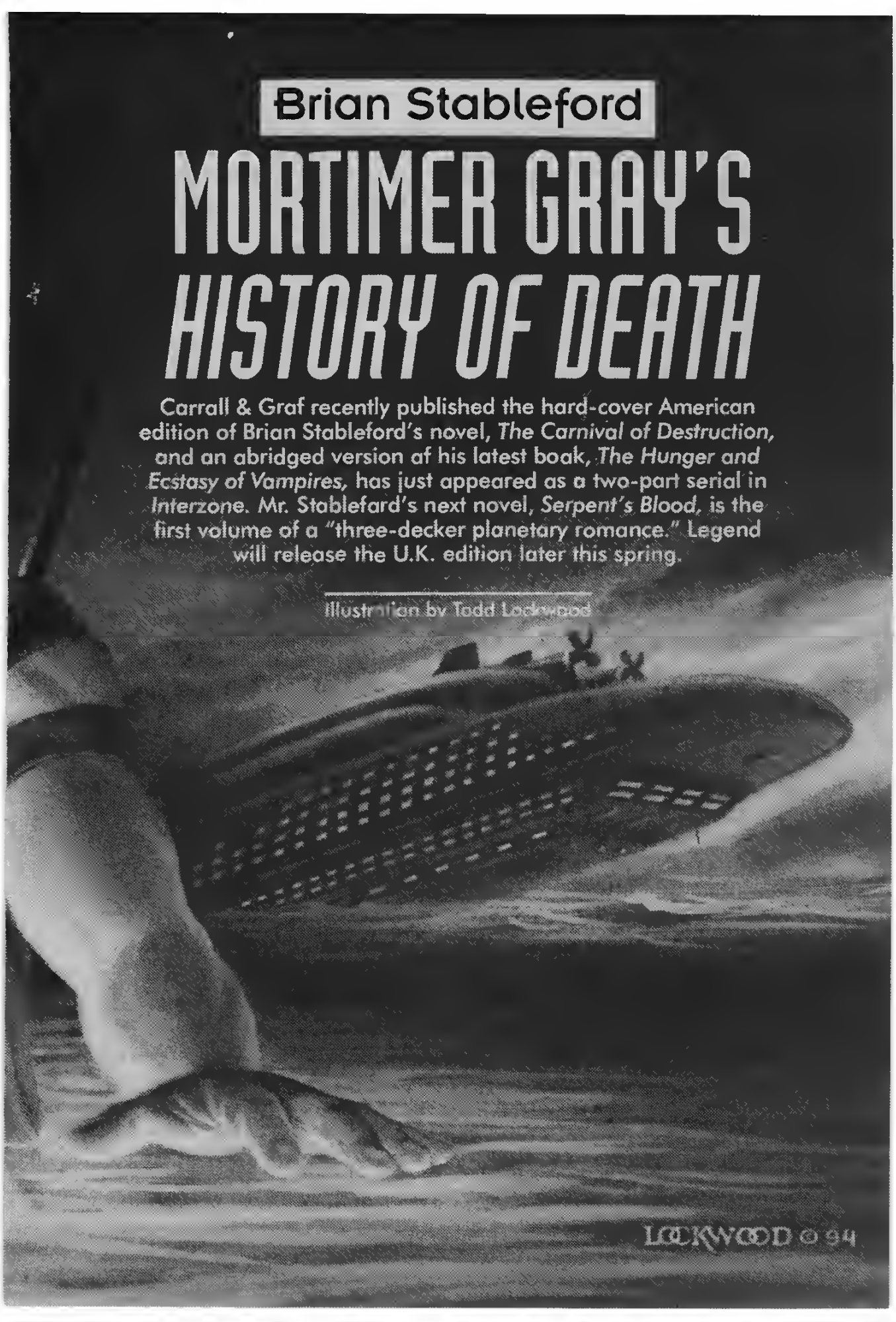


Brian Stableford

MORTIMER GRAY'S HISTORY OF DEATH

Carrall & Graf recently published the hard-cover American edition of Brian Stableford's novel, *The Carnival of Destruction*, and an abridged version af his latest boak, *The Hunger and Ecstasy of Vampires*, has just appeared as a two-part serial in *Interzone*. Mr. Stablefard's next novel, *Serpent's Blood*, is the first volume of a "three-decker planetary romance." Legend will release the U.K. edition later this spring.

Illustration by Todd Lockwood



1

I was an utterly unexceptional child of the twenty-ninth century, comprehensively engineered for emortality while I was still a more-or-less inchoate blastula, and decanted from an artificial womb in Naburn Hatchery in the country of York in the Defederated States of Europe. I was raised in an aggregate family which consisted of six men and six women. I was, of course, an only child, and I received the customary superabundance of love, affection, and admiration. With the aid of excellent internal technologies, I grew up reasonable, charitable, self-controlled, and intensely serious of mind.

It's evident that not *everyone* grows up like that, but I've never quite been able to understand how people manage to avoid it. If conspicuous individuality—and frank perversity—aren't programmed in the genes or rooted in early upbringing, how on earth do they spring into being with such determined irregularity? But this is *my* story, not the world's, and I shouldn't digress.

In due course, the time came for me—as it comes to everyone—to leave my family and enter a community of my peers for my first spell at college. I elected to go to Adelaide in Australia, because I liked the name.

Although my memories of that period are understandably hazy, I feel sure that I had begun to see the *fascination* of history long before the crucial event which determined my path in life. The subject seemed—in stark contrast to the disciplined coherency of mathematics or the sciences—so huge, so amazingly abundant in its data, and so charmingly disorganized. I was always a very orderly and organized person, and I needed a vocation like history to loosen me up a little. It was not, however, until I set forth on an ill-fated expedition on the sailing-ship *Genesis* in September 2901, that the exact form of my destiny was determined.

I use the word "destiny" with the utmost care; it is no mere rhetorical flourish. What happened when *Genesis* defied the supposed limits of possibility and turned turtle was no mere incident, and the impression that it made on my fledging mind was no mere suggestion. Before that ship set sail, a thousand futures were open to me; afterward, I was beset by an irresistible compulsion. My destiny was determined the day *Genesis* went down; as a result of that tragedy, *my fate was sealed.*

We were *en route* from Brisbane to tour the Creationist Islands of Micronesia, which were then regarded as artistic curiosities rather than daring experiments in continental design. I had expected to find the experience exhilarating, but almost as soon as we had left port, I was struck down by sea-sickness.

Sea-sickness, by virtue of being psychosomatic, is one of the very few diseases with which modern internal technology is sometimes impotent to deal, and I was miserably confined to my cabin while I waited for my mind to make the necessary adaptation. I was bitterly ashamed of myself, for I alone out of half a hundred passengers had fallen prey to this

strange atavistic malaise. While the others partied on deck, beneath the glorious light of the tropic stars, I lay in my bunk, half-delirious with discomfort and lack of sleep. I thought myself the unluckiest man in the world.

When I was abruptly hurled from my bed, I thought that I had fallen—that my tossing and turning had inflicted one more ignominy upon me. When I couldn't recover my former position after having spent long minutes fruitlessly groping about amid all kinds of mysterious debris, I assumed that I must be confused. When I couldn't open the door of my cabin even though I had the handle in my hand, I assumed that my failure was the result of clumsiness. When I finally got out into the corridor, and found myself crawling in shallow water with the artificial bioluminescent strip beneath instead of above me, I thought I must be mad.

When the little girl spoke to me, I thought at first that she was a delusion, and that I was lost in a nightmare. It wasn't until she touched me, and tried to drag me upright with her tiny, frail hands, and addressed me by name—albeit incorrectly—that I was finally able to focus my thoughts.

"You have to get up, Mr. Mortimer," she said. "The boat's upside-down."

She was only eight years old, but she spoke quite calmly and reasonably.

"That's impossible," I told her. "*Genesis* is unsinkable. There's no way it could turn upside-down."

"But it *is* upside-down," she insisted—and, as she did so, I finally realized the significance of the fact that the floor was glowing the way the ceiling should have glowed. "The water's coming in. I think we'll have to swim out."

The light put out by the ceiling-strip was as bright as ever, but the rippling water overlaying it made it seem dim and uncertain. The girl's little face, lit from below, seemed terribly serious within the frame of her dark and curly hair.

"I can't swim," I said, flatly.

She looked at me as if I were insane, or stupid, but it was true. I couldn't swim. I'd never liked the idea, and I'd never seen any necessity. All modern ships—even sailing-ships designed to be cute and quaint for the benefit of tourists—were unsinkable.

I scrambled to my feet, and put out both my hands to steady myself, to hold myself against the upside-down walls. The water was knee-deep. I couldn't tell whether it was increasing or not—which told me, reassuringly, that it couldn't be rising very quickly. The upturned boat was rocking this way and that, and I could hear the rumble of waves breaking on the outside of the hull, but I didn't know how much of that apparent violence was in my mind.

"My name's Emily," the little girl told me. "I'm frightened. All my

mothers and fathers were on deck. *Everyone* was on deck, except for you and me. Do you think they're all dead?"

"They can't be," I said, marveling at the fact that she spoke so soberly, even when she said that she was frightened. I realized, however, that if the ship had suffered the kind of misfortune which could turn it upside-down, the people on deck might indeed be dead. I tried to remember the passengers gossiping in the departure lounge, introducing themselves to one another with such fervor. The little girl had been with a party of nine, none of whose names I could remember. It occurred to me that *her whole family* might have been wiped out, that she might now be that rarest of all rare beings, an *orphan.* It was almost unimaginable. What possible catastrophe, I wondered, could have done that?

I asked Emily what had happened. She didn't know. Like me she had been in her bunk, sleeping the sleep of the innocent.

"Are we going to die too?" she asked. "I've been a good girl. I've never told a lie." It couldn't have been literally true, but I knew exactly what she meant. She was eight years old, and she had every right to expect to live till she was eight hundred. She didn't *deserve* to die. It wasn't fair.

I knew full well that fairness didn't really come into it, and I expect that she knew it too, even if my fellow historians were wrong about the virtual abolition of all the artifices of childhood, but I knew in my heart that what she said was *right,* and that insofar as the imperious laws of nature ruled her observation irrelevant, the *universe* was wrong. It *wasn't* fair. She *had* been a good girl. If she died, it would be a monstrous injustice.

Perhaps it was merely a kind of psychological defense mechanism that helped me to displace my own mortal anxieties, but the horror that ran through me was all focused on her. At that moment, her plight—not *our* plight, but *hers*—seemed to be the only thing that mattered. It was as if her dignified fear and her placid courage somehow contained the essence of human existence, the purest product of human progress.

Perhaps it was only my cowardly mind's refusal to contemplate anything else, but the only thing I could think of while I tried to figure out what to do was the awfulness of what she was saying. As that awfulness possessed me, it was magnified a thousandfold, and it seemed to me that in her lone and tiny voice there was a much greater voice speaking for multitudes: for all the human children that had ever died before achieving maturity; all the *good* children who had died without ever having the chance to *deserve to die.*

"I don't think any more water can get in," she said, with a slight tremor in her voice. "But there's only so much air. If we stay here too long, we'll suffocate."

"It's a big ship," I told her. "If we're trapped in an air-bubble, it must be a very large one."

"But it won't last forever," she told me. She was eight years old and hoped to live to be eight hundred, and she was absolutely right. The air wouldn't last forever. Hours, certainly; maybe days—but not forever.

"There are survival pods under the bunks," she said. She had obviously been paying attention to the welcoming speeches that the captain and the chief steward had delivered in the lounge the evening after embarkation. She'd plugged the chips they'd handed out into her trusty handbook, like the good girl she was, and inwardly digested what they had to teach her—unlike those of us who were blithely careless and wretchedly seasick.

"We can both fit into one of the pods," she went on, "but we have to get it out of the boat before we inflate it. We have to go up—I mean *down*—the stairway into the water and away from the boat. You'll have to carry the pod, because it's too big for me."

"I can't swim," I reminded her.

"It doesn't matter," she said, patiently. "All you have to do is hold your breath and kick yourself away from the boat. You'll float up to the surface whether you can swim or not. Then you just yank the cord and the pod will inflate. You have to hang on to it, though. Don't let go."

I stared at her, wondering how she could be so calm, so controlled, so efficient.

"Listen to the water breaking on the hull," I whispered. "Feel the movement of the boat. It would take a hurricane to overturn a boat like this. We wouldn't stand a chance out there."

"It's not so bad," she told me. She didn't have both hands out to brace herself against the walls, although she lifted one occasionally to stave off the worst of the lurches caused by the bobbing of the boat.

But if it wasn't a hurricane which turned us over, I thought, *what the hell was it? Whales have been extinct for eight hundred years.*

"We don't have to go just yet," Emily said, mildly, "but we'll have to go in the end. We have to get out. The pod's bright orange, and it has a distress beacon. We should be picked up within twenty-four hours, but there'll be supplies for a week."

I had every confidence that modern technology could sustain us for a month, if necessary. Even having to drink a little sea-water if your recycling gel clots only qualifies as a minor inconvenience nowadays. Drowning is another matter; so is asphyxiation. She was absolutely right. We had to get out of the upturned boat—not immediately, but some time soon. Help might get to us before then, but we couldn't wait, and we shouldn't. We were, after all, human beings. We were supposed to be able to take charge of our own destinies, to do what we *ought* to do. Anything less would be a betrayal of our heritage. I knew that, and understood it.

But I couldn't swim.

"It's okay, Mr. Mortimer," she said, putting her reassuring hand in mine. "We can do it. We'll go together. It'll be all right."

Emily was right. We *could* do it, together, and we did—not immediately, I confess, but, in the end, we did it. It was the most terrifying and most horrible experience of my young life, but it had to be done, and we did it.

When I finally dived into that black pit of water, knowing that I had to go down and sideways before I could hope to go up, I was carried forward by the knowledge that Emily expected it of me, and needed me to do it. Without her, I'm sure that I would have died. I simply would not have had the courage to save myself. Because she was there, I dived, with the pod clutched in my arms. Because she was there, I managed to kick away from the hull and yank the cord to inflate it.

It wasn't until I had pulled Emily into the pod, and made sure that she was safe, that I paused to think how remarkable it was that the sea was hot enough to scald us both.

We were three storm-tossed days afloat before the helicopter picked us up. We cursed our ill-luck, not having the least inkling how bad things were elsewhere. We couldn't understand why the weather was getting worse instead of better.

When the pilot finally explained it, we couldn't immediately take it in. Perhaps that's not surprising, given that the geologists were just as astonished as everyone else. After all, the sea-bed had been quietly cracking wherever the tectonic plates were pulling apart for millions of years; it was an ongoing phenomenon, very well understood. Hundreds of black smokers and underwater volcanoes were under constant observation. Nobody had any reason to expect that a plate could simply *break* so far away from its rim, or that the fissure could be so deep, so long, and so rapid in its extension. Everyone thought that the main threat to the earth's surface was posed by wayward comets; all vigilant eyes were directed outward. No one had expected such awesome force to erupt from within, from the hot mantle which lay, hubbling and bubbling, beneath the earth's fragile crust.

It was, apparently, an enormous bubble of upwelling gas that contrived the near-impossible feat of flipping *Genesis* over. The earthquakes and the tidal waves came later.

It was the worst natural disaster in six hundred years. One million, nine hundred thousand people died in all. Emily wasn't the only child to lose her entire family, and I shudder to think of the number of families which lost their only children. We historians have to maintain a sense of perspective, though. Compared with the number of people who died in the wars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, or the numbers of people who died in epidemics in earlier centuries, nineteen hundred thousand is a trivial figure.

Perhaps I would have done what I eventually set out to do anyway. Perhaps the Great Coral Sea Catastrophe would have appalled me even if I'd been on the other side of the world, cocooned in the safety of a tree-house or an apartment in one of the crystal cities—but I don't think so.

It was because I was at the very center of things, because my life was literally turned upside-down by the disaster—and because eight-year-old Emily Marchant was there to save my life with her common sense and her composure—that I set out to write a definitive history of death,

intending to reveal not merely the dull facts of mankind's longest and hardest battle, but also the real meaning and significance of it.

2

The first volume of Mortimer Gray's *History of Death,* entitled *The Prehistory of Death,* was published on 21 January 2914. It was, unusually for its day, a mute book, with no voice-over, sound-effects, or background music. Nor did it have any original art-work, all the illustrations being unenhanced still photographs. It was, in short, the kind of book that only a historian would have published. Its reviewers generally agreed that it was an old-fashioned example of scrupulous scholarship, and none expected that access demand would be considerable. Many commentators questioned the merit of Gray's arguments.

The Prehistory of Death summarized what was known about early hominid lifestyles, and had much to say about the effects of natural selection on the patterns of mortality in modern man's ancestor species. Gray carefully discussed the evolution of parental care as a genetic strategy. Earlier species of man, he observed, had raised parental care to a level of efficiency which permitted the human infant to be born at a much earlier stage in its development than any other, maximizing its opportunity to be shaped by nurture and learning. From the very beginning, Gray proposed, human species were *actively* at war with death. The evolutionary success of *Homo sapiens* was based in the collaborative activities of parents in protecting, cherishing, and preserving the lives of children: activities that extended beyond immediate family groups as reciprocal altruism made it advantageous for humans to form tribes, and ultimately nations.

In these circumstances, Gray argued, it was entirely natural that the origins of consciousness and culture should be intimately bound up with a keen awareness of the war against death. He asserted that the first great task of the human imagination must have been to carry forward that war. It was entirely understandable, he said, that early paleontologists, having discovered the bones of a Neanderthal man in an apparent grave, with the remains of a primitive garland of flowers, should instantly have felt an intimate kinship with him; there could be no more persuasive evidence of full humanity than the attachment of ceremony to the idea and the fact of death.

Gray waxed lyrical about the importance of ritual as a symbolization of opposition and enmity to death. He had no patience with the proposition that such rituals were of no practical value, a mere window-dressing of culture. On the contrary, he claimed that there was no activity *more* practical than this expressive recognition of the *value* of life, this imposition of a moral order on the fact of human mortality. The birth of agriculture Gray regarded as a mere sophistication of food-gathering, of considerable importance as a technical discovery but of little significance

in transforming human nature. The practices of burying the dead with ceremony, and of ritual mourning, on the other hand, *were,* in his view, evidence of the transformation of human nature, of the fundamental creation of meaning that made human life very different from the life of animals.

Prehistorians who marked out the evolution of man by his developing technology—the Stone Age giving way to the Bronze Age, the Bronze Age to the Iron Age—were, Gray conceded, taking intelligent advantage of those relics that had stood the test of time. He warned, however, of the folly of thinking that because tools had survived the millennia, it must have been tool-making that was solely or primarily responsible for human progress. In his view, the primal cause that made people invent was man's ongoing war against death.

It was not *tools* which created man and gave birth to civilization, Mortimer Gray proclaimed, but the *awareness of mortality.*

3

Although its impact on my nascent personality was considerable, the Coral Sea Catastrophe was essentially an impersonal disaster. The people who died, including those who had been aboard the *Genesis,* were all unknown to me; it was not until some years later that I experienced personal bereavement. It wasn't one of my parents who died—by the time the first of them quit this earth I was nearly a hundred years old and our temporary closeness was a half-remembered thing of the distant past—but one of my spouses.

By the time *The Prehistory of Death* was published, I'd contracted my first marriage: a group contract with a relatively small aggregate consisting of three other men and four women. We lived in Lamu, on the coast of Kenya, a nation to which I had been drawn by my studies of the early evolution of man. We were all young people, and we had formed our group for companionship rather than for parenting—which was a privilege conventionally left, even in those days, to much older people. We didn't go in for much fleshsex, because we were still finding our various ways through the maze of erotic virtuality, but we took the time—as I suppose all young people do—to explore its unique delights. I can't remember exactly why I decided to join such a group; I presume that it was because I accepted, tacitly at least, the conventional wisdom that there is spice in variety, and that one should do one's best to keep a broad front of experience.

It wasn't a particularly happy marriage, but it served its purpose. We went in for a good deal of sporting activity and conventional tourism. We visited the other continents from time to time, but most of our adventures took us back and forth across Africa. Most of my spouses were practical ecologists involved in one way or another with the re-greening of the north and south, or with the reforestation of the equatorial belt.

What little credit I earned to add to my Allocation was earned by assisting them; such fees as I received for net-access to my work were inconsiderable. Axel, Jodocus, and Minna were all involved in large-scale hydrological engineering, and liked to describe themselves, lightheartedly, as the Lamu Rainmakers. The rest of us became, inevitably, the Rainmakers-in-Law.

To begin with, I had considerable affection for all the other members of my new family, but as time went by the usual accretion of petty irritations built up, and a couple of changes in the group's personnel failed to renew the initial impetus. The research for the second volume of my history began to draw me more and more to Egypt and to Greece, even though there was no real need actually to travel in order to do the relevant research. I think we would have divorced in 2919 anyhow, even if it hadn't been for Grizel's death.

She went swimming in the newly re-routed Kwarra one day, and didn't come back.

Maybe the fact of her death wouldn't have hit me so hard if she hadn't been drowned, but I was still uneasy about deep water—even the relatively placid waters of the great rivers. If I'd been able to swim, I might have gone out with her, but I hadn't. I didn't even know she was missing until the news came in that a body had been washed up twenty kilometers downriver.

"It was a million-to-one thing," Ayesha told me, when she came back from the on-site inquest. "She must have been caught from behind by a log moving in the current, or something like that. We'll never know for sure. She must have been knocked unconscious, though, or badly dazed. Otherwise, she'd never have drifted into the white water. The rocks finished her off."

Rumor has it that many people simply can't take in news of the death of someone they love—that it flatly defies belief. I didn't react that way. With me, belief was instantaneous, and I just gave way under its pressure. I literally fell over, because my legs wouldn't support me—another psychosomatic failure about which my internal machinery could do nothing—and I wept uncontrollably. None of the others did, not even Axel, who'd been closer to Grizel than anyone. They were sympathetic at first, but it wasn't long before a note of annoyance began to creep into their reassurances.

"Come on, Morty," Ilya said, voicing the thought the rest of them were too diplomatic to let out. "You know more about death than any of us; if it doesn't help you to get a grip, what good is all that research?"

He was right, of course. Axel and Ayesha had often tried to suggest, delicately, that mine was an essentially unhealthy fascination, and now they felt vindicated.

"If you'd actually bothered to read my book," I retorted, "you'd know that it has nothing complimentary to say about philosophical acceptance.

It sees a sharp awareness of mortality, and the capacity to feel the horror of death so keenly, as key forces driving human evolution."

"But you don't have to act it out so flamboyantly," Ilya came back, perhaps using cruelty to conceal and assuage his own misery. "We've evolved now. We've got past all that. We've matured." Ilya was the oldest of us, and he *seemed* very old, although he was only sixty-five. In those days, there weren't nearly as many double centenarians around as there are nowadays, and triple centenarians were very rare indeed. We take emortality so much for granted that it's easy to forget how recent a development it is.

"It's what I feel," I told him, retreating into uncompromising assertion. "I can't help it."

"We *all* loved her," Ayesha reminded me. "We'll all miss her. You're not *proving* anything, Morty."

What she meant was that I wasn't proving anything except my own instability, but she spoke more accurately than she thought; I wasn't proving anything at all. I was just reacting—atavistically, perhaps, but with crude honesty and authentically childlike innocence.

"We all have to pull together now," she added, "for Grizel's sake."

A death in the family almost always leads to universal divorce in childless marriages; nobody knows why. Such a loss *does* force the survivors to pull together, but it seems that the process of pulling together only serves to emphasize the incompleteness of the unit. We all went our separate ways, even the three Rainmakers.

I set out to use my solitude to become a true neo-Epicurean, after the fashion of the times, seeking no excess and deriving an altogether *appropriate* pleasure from everything I did. I took care to cultivate a proper love for the commonplace, training myself to a pitch of perfection in all the techniques of physiological control necessary to physical fitness and quiet metabolism.

I soon convinced myself that I'd transcended such primitive and adolescent goals as happiness, and had cultivated instead a truly civilized *ataraxia:* a calm of mind whose value went beyond the limits of ecstasy and exultation.

Perhaps I was fooling myself, but, if I was, I succeeded. The habits stuck. No matter what lifestyle fashions came and went thereafter, I remained a stubborn neo-Epicurean, immune to all other eupsychian fantasies. For a while, though, I was perpetually haunted by Grizel's memory—and not, alas, by the memory of all things that we'd shared while she was *alive.* I gradually forgot the sound of her voice, the touch of her hand and even the image of her face, remembering only the horror of her sudden and unexpected departure from the arena of my experience.

For the next ten years, I lived in Alexandria, in a simple villa cleverly gantzed out of the desert sands—sands which still gave an impression of timelessness even though they had been restored to wilderness as

recently as the twenth-seventh century, when Egypt's food economy had been realigned to take full advantage of the newest techniques in artificial photosynthesis.

4

The second volume of Mortimer Gray's *History of Death,* entitled *Death in the Ancient World,* was published on 7 May 2931. It contained a wealth of data regarding burial practices and patterns of mortality in Egypt, the Kingdoms of Sumer and Akkad, the Indus civilizations of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, the Yangshao and Lungshan cultures of the Far East, the cultures of the Olmecs and Zpotecs, Greece before and after Alexander, and the pre-Christian Roman Empire. It paid particular attention to the elaborate mythologies of life after death developed by ancient cultures.

Gray gave most elaborate consideration to the Egyptians, whose eschatology evidently fascinated him. He spared no effort in description and discussion of the *Book of the Dead,* the Hall of Double Justice, Anubis and Osiris, the custom of mummification, and the building of pryamid-tombs. He was almost as fascinated by the elaborate geography of the Greek Underworld, the characters associated with it—Hades and Persephone, Thanatos and the Erinnyes, Cerberus and Charon—and the descriptions of the unique fates reserved for such individuals as Sisyphus, Ixion, and Tantalus. The development of such myths as these Gray regarded as a triumph of the creative imagination. In his account, myth-making and story-telling were vital weapons in the war against death—a war that had still to be fought in the mind of man, because there was little yet to be accomplished by defiance of its claims upon the body.

In the absence of an effective medical science, Gray argued, the war against death was essentially a war of propaganda, and myths were to be judged in that light—not by their truthfulness, even in some allegorical or metaphorical sense, but by their usefulness in generating *morale* and meaning. By elaborating and extrapolating the process of death in this way, a more secure moral order could be imported into social life. People thus achieved a sense of continuity with past and future generations, so that every individual became part of a great enterprise which extended across the generations, from the beginning to the end of time.

Gray did not regard the building of the pyramids as a kind of gigantic folly or vanity, or a way to dispose of the energies of the peasants when they were not required in harvesting the bounty of the fertile Nile. He argued that pyramid-building should be seen as the most useful of all labors, because it was work directed at the glorious imposition of human endeavor upon the natural landscape. The placing of a royal mummy, with all its accoutrements, in a fabulous geometric edifice of stone was, for Gray, a loud, confident, and entirely appropriate statement of humanity's invasion of the empire of death.

Gray complimented those tribesmen who worshipped their ancestors and thought them always close at hand, ready to deliver judgments upon the living. Such people, he felt, had fully mastered an elementary truth of human existence: that the dead were not entirely gone, but lived on, intruding upon memory and dream, both when they were bidden and when they were not. He approved of the idea that the dead should have a voice, and must be entitled to speak, and that the living had a moral duty to listen. Because these ancient tribes were as direly short of history as they were of medicine, he argued, they were entirely justified in allowing their ancestors to live on in the minds of living people, where the culture those ancestors had forged similarly resided.

Some reviewers complimented Gray on the breadth of his research and the comprehensiveness of his data, but few endorsed the propriety of his interpretations. He was widely advised to be more dispassionate in carrying forward his project.

5

I was sixty when I married again. This time, it was a singular marriage, to Sharane Fereday. We set up home in Avignon, and lived together for nearly twenty years. I won't say that we were exceptionally happy, but I came to depend on her closeness and her affection, and the day she told me that she had had enough was the darkest of my life so far—far darker in its desolation than the day Emily Marchant and I had been trapped in the wreck of the *Genesis,* although it didn't mark me as deeply.

"Twenty years is a long time, Mortimer," she told me. "It's time to move on—time for you as well as for me."

She was being sternly reasonable at that stage; I knew from experience that the sternness would crumble if I put it to the test, and I thought that her resolve would crumble with it, as it had before in similar circumstances, but it didn't.

"I'm truly sorry," she said, when she was eventually reduced to tears, "but I have to do it. I have to go. It's *my* life, and your part of it is over. I hate hurting you, but I don't want to live with you any more. It's my fault, not yours, but that's the way it is."

It wasn't anybody's fault. I can see that clearly now, although it wasn't so easy to see it at the time. Like the Great Coral Sea Catastrophe or Grizel's drowning, it was just something that *happened.* Things do happen, regardless of people's best-laid plans, most heartfelt wishes, and intensest hopes.

Now that memory has blotted out the greater part of that phase of my life—including, I presume, the worst of it—I don't really know why I was so devastated by Sharane's decision, nor why it should have filled me with such black despair. Had I cultivated a dependence so absolute that it seemed irreplaceable, or was it only my pride that had suffered a

sickening blow? Was it the imagined consequences of the rejection or merely the fact of rejection itself that sickened me so? Even now, I can't tell for certain. Even then, my neo-Epicurean conscience must have told me over and over again to pull myself together, to conduct myself with more decorum.

I tried. I'm certain that I tried.

Sharane's love for the ancient past was even more intense than mine, but her writings were far less dispassionate. She was an historian of sorts, but she wasn't an *academic* historian; her writings tended to the lyrical rather than the factual even when she was supposedly writing non-fiction.

Sharane would never have written a mute book, or one whose pictures didn't move. Had it been allowed by law at that time, she'd have fed her readers designer psychotropics to heighten their responses according to the schemes of her texts. She was a VR scriptwriter rather than a text-writer like me. She wasn't content to know about the past; she wanted to re-create it and make it solid and *live* in it. Nor did she reserve such inclinations to the privacy of her E-suit. She was flamboyantly old-fashioned in all that she did. She liked to dress in gaudy pastiches of the costumes represented in Greek or Egyptian art, and she liked decor to match. People who knew us were mildly astonished that we should want to live together, given the difference in our personalities, but I suppose it was an attraction of opposites. Perhaps my intensity of purpose and solitude had begun to weigh rather heavily upon me when we met, and my carefully cultivated calm of mind threatened to become a kind of toiling inertia.

On the other hand, perhaps that's all confabulation and rationalization. I was a different person then, and I've since lost touch with that person as completely as I've lost touch with everyone else I once knew.

But I *do* remember, vaguely. . . .

I remember that I found in Sharane a certain precious *wildness* that, although it wasn't entirely spontaneous, was unfailingly amusing. She had the happy gift of never taking herself too seriously, although she was wholehearted enough in her determined attempts to put herself imaginatively in touch with the past.

From her point of view, I suppose I was doubly valuable. On the one hand, I was a fount of information and inspiration, on the other a kind of anchorage whose solidity kept her from losing herself in her flights of the imagination. Twenty years of marriage ought to have cemented her dependence on me just as it had cemented my dependence on her, but it didn't.

"You think I need you to keep my feet on the ground," Sharane said, as the break between us was completely and carefully rendered irreparable, "but I don't. Anyhow, I've been weighed down long enough. I need to soar for a while, to spread my wings."

* * *

Sharane and I had talked for a while, as married people do, about the possibility of having a child. We had both made deposits to the French national gamete bank, so that if we felt the same way when the time finally came to exercise our right of replacement—or to specify in our wills how that right was to be posthumously exercised—we could order an ovum to be unfrozen and fertilized.

I had always known, of course, that such flights of fancy were not to be taken too seriously, but when I accepted that the marriage was indeed over, there seemed to be an extra dimension of tragedy and misery in the knowledge that our genes never would be combined—that our separation cast our legacies once again upon the chaotic sea of irresolution.

Despite the extremity of my melancholy, I never contemplated suicide. Although I'd already used up the traditional threescore years and ten, I was in no doubt at all that it wasn't yet time to remove myself from the crucible of human evolution to make room for my successor, whether that successor was to be born from an ovum of Sharane's or not. No matter how black my mood was when Sharane left, I knew that my *History of Death* remained to be completed, and that the work would require at least another century. Even so, the breaking of such an intimate bond filled me with intimations of mortality and a painful sense of the futility of all my endeavors.

My first divorce had come about because a cruel accident had ripped apart the delicate fabric of my life, but my second—or so it seemed to me—was itself a horrid rent shearing my very being into ragged fragments. I hope that I tried with all my might not to blame Sharane, but how could I avoid it? And how could she not resent my overt and covert accusations, my veiled and naked resentments?

"Your problem, Mortimer," she said to me, when her lachrymose phase had given way to bright anger, "is that you're *obsessed.* You're a deeply morbid man, and it's not healthy. There's some special fear in you, some altogether exceptional horror which feeds upon you day and night, and makes you grotesquely vulnerable to occurrences that normal people can take in their stride, and that ill befit a self-styled Epicurean. If you want my advice, you ought to abandon that history you're writing, at least for a while, and devote yourself to something brighter and more vigorous."

"Death is my life," I informed her, speaking metaphorically, and not entirely without irony. "It always will be, until and including the end."

I remember saying that. The rest is vague, but I really do remember saying that.

6

The third volume of Mortimer Gray's *History of Death,* entitled *The Empires of Faith,* was published on 18 August 2954. The introduction announced that the author had been forced to set aside his initial ambition to write a truly comprehensive history, and stated that he would

henceforth be unashamedly eclectic, and contentedly ethnocentric, because he did not wish to be a mere archivist of death, and therefore could not regard all episodes in humankind's war against death as being of equal interest. He declared that he was more interested in interpretation than mere summary, and that insofar as the war against death had been a moral crusade, he felt fully entitled to draw morals from it.

This preface, understandably, dismayed those critics who had urged the author to be more dispassionate. Some reviewers were content to condemn the new volume without even bothering to inspect the rest of it, although it was considerably shorter than the second volume and had a rather more fluent style. Others complained that the day of mute text was dead and gone, and that there was no place in the modern world for pictures that resolutely refused to move.

Unlike many contemporary historians, whose birth into a world in which religious faith was almost extinct had robbed them of any sympathy for the imperialists of dogma, Gray proposed that the great religions had been one of the finest achievements of humankind. He regarded them as a vital stage in the evolution of community—as social technologies which had permitted a spectacular transcendence of the limitation of community to the tribe or region. Faiths, he suggested, were the first instruments that could bind together different language groups, and even different races. It was not until the spread of the great religions, Gray argued, that the possibility came into being of gathering all men together into a single common enterprise. He regretted, of course, that the principal product of this great dream was two millennia of bitter and savage conflict between adherents of different faiths or adherents of different versions of the same faith, but thought the ambition worthy of all possible respect and admiration. He even retained some sympathy for jihads and crusades, in the formulation of which people had tried to attribute more meaning to the sacrifice of life than they ever had before.

Gray was particularly fascinated by the symbology of the Christian mythos, which had taken as its central image the death on the cross of Jesus, and had tried to make that one image of death carry an enormous allegorical load. He was entranced by the idea of Christ's death as a force of redemption and salvation, by the notion that this person died *for others*. He extended the argument to take in the Christian martyrs, who added to the primal crucifixion a vast series of symbolic and morally significant deaths. This, he considered, was a colossal achievement of the imagination, a crucial victory by which death was dramatically transfigured in the theater of the human imagination—as was the Christian idea of death as a kind of reconciliation: a gateway to Heaven, if properly met; a gateway to Hell, if not. Gray seized upon the idea of absolution from sin following confession, and particularly the notion of deathbed repentance, as a daring raid into the territories of the imagination previously ruled by fear of death.

Gray's commentaries on the other major religions were less elaborate but no less interested. Various ideas of reincarnation and the related

concept of *karma* he discussed at great length, as one of the most ingenious imaginative bids for freedom from the tyranny of death. He was not quite so enthusiastic about the idea of the world as illusion, the idea of nirvana, and certain other aspects of Far Eastern thought, although he was impressed in several ways by Confucius and the Buddha. All these things and more he assimilated to the main line of his argument, which was that the great religions had made bold imaginative leaps in order to carry forward the war against death on a broader front than ever before, providing vast numbers of individuals with an efficient intellectual weaponry of moral purpose.

7

After Sharane left, I stayed on in Avignon for a while. The house where we had lived was demolished, and I had another raised in its place. I resolved to take up the reclusive life again, at least for a while. I had come to think of myself as one of nature's monks, and when I was tempted to flights of fancy of a more personal kind than those retailed in virtual reality, I could imagine myself an avatar of some patient scholar born fifteen hundred years before, contentedly submissive to the Benedictine rule. I didn't, of course, believe in the possibility of reincarnation, and when such beliefs became fashionable again I found it almost impossible to indulge any more fantasies of that kind.

In 2960, I moved to Antarctica, not to Amundsen City—which had become the world's political center since the United Nations had elected to set up headquarters in "the continent without nations"—but to Cape Adare on the Ross Sea, which was a relatively lonely spot.

I moved into a tall house rather resembling a lighthouse, from whose upper stories I could look out at the edge of the ice-cap and watch the penguins at play. I was reasonably contented, and soon came to feel that I had put the torments and turbulences of my early life behind me.

I often went walking across the nearer reaches of the icebound sea, but I rarely got into difficulties. Ironically enough, my only serious injury of that period was a broken leg, which I sustained while working with a rescue party attempting to locate and save one of my neighbors, Ziru Majumdar, who had fallen into a crevasse while out on a similar expedition. We ended up in adjacent beds at the hospital in Amundsen City.

"I'm truly sorry about your leg, Mr. Gray," Majumdar said. "It was very stupid of me to get lost. After all, I've lived here for thirty years; I thought I knew every last iceridge like the back of my hand. It's not as if the weather was particularly bad, and I've never suffered from summer rhapsody or snowblindness."

I'd suffered from both—I was still awkwardly vulnerable to psychosomatic ills—but they only served to make me more careful. An uneasy mind can sometimes be an advantage.

"It wasn't your fault, Mr. Majumdar," I graciously insisted. "I suppose I must have been a little over-confident myself, or I'd never have slipped and fallen. At least they were able to pull me out in a matter of minutes; you must have lain unconscious at the bottom of that crevasse for nearly two days."

"Just about. I came round several times—at least, I think I did—but my internal tech was pumping so much dope around my system it's difficult to be sure. My surskin and thermosuit were doing their best to keep me warm, but the first law of thermodynamics doesn't give you much slack when you're at the bottom of a cleft in the permafrost. I've got authentic frostbite in my toes, you know—imagine that!"

I dutifully tried to imagine it, but it wasn't easy. He could hardly be in pain, so it was difficult to conjure up any notion of what it might feel like to have necrotized toes. The doctors reckoned that it would take a week for the nanomachines to restore the tissues to their former pristine condition.

"Mind you," he added, with a small embarrassed laugh, "it's only a matter of time before the whole biosphere gets frostbite, isn't it? Unless the sun gets stirred up again."

More than fifty years had passed since scrupulous students of the sunspot cycle had announced the advent of a new Ice Age, but the world was quite unworried by the exceedingly slow advance of the glaciers across the Northern Hemisphere. It was the sort of thing that only cropped up in light banter.

"I won't mind that," I said, contemplatively. "Nor will you, I dare say. We like ice—why else would we live here?"

"Right. Not that I agree with those Gaean Liberationists, mind. I hear they're proclaiming that the inter-glacial periods are simply Gaea's fevers, that the birth of civilization was just a morbid symptom of the planet's sickness, and that human culture has so far been a mere delirium of the noösphere."

He obviously paid more attention to the lunatic fringe channels than I did.

"It's just colorful rhetoric," I told him. "They don't mean it literally."

"Think not? Well, perhaps. I was delirious myself for a while when I was down that hole. Can't be sure whether I was asleep or awake, but I was certainly lost in some vivid dreams—and I mean *vivid*. I don't know about you, but I always find VR a bit flat, even if I use illicit psychotropics to give delusion a helping hand. I think it's to do with the protective effects of our internal technology. Nanomachines mostly do their job a little *too* well, because of the built-in safety margins—it's only when they reach the limits of their capacity that they let really interesting things begin to happen."

I knew he was building up to some kind of self-justification, but I felt that he was entitled to it. I nodded, to give him permission to prattle on.

"You have to go to the very brink of extinction to reach the cutting edge of experience, you see. I found that out while I was trapped down

there in the ice, not knowing whether the rescuers would get to me in time. You can learn a lot about life, and about yourself, in a situation like that. It really was vivid—more vivid than anything I ever . . . well, what I'm trying to get at is that we're too *safe* nowadays; we can have no idea of the *zest* there was in living in the bad old days. Not that I'm about to take up jumping into crevasses as a hobby, you understand. Once in a very long while is plenty."

"Yes, it is," I agreed, shifting my itching leg and wishing that nanomachines weren't so slow to compensate for trifling but annoying sensations. "Once in a while is certainly enough for me. In fact, I for one will be quite content if it never happens again. I don't think I need any more of the kind of enlightenment which comes from experiences like that. I was in the Great Coral Sea Catastrophe, you know—shipwrecked, scalded, and lost at sea for days on end."

"It's not the same," he insisted, "but you won't be able to understand the difference until it happens to you."

I didn't believe him. In that instance, I suppose, he was right and I was wrong.

I'd never heard Mr. Majumdar speak so freely before, and I never heard him do it again. The social life of the Cape Adare "exiles" was unusually formal, hemmed in by numerous barriers of formality and etiquette. After an embarrassing phase of learning and adjustment, I'd found the formality aesthetically appealing, and had played the game with enthusiasm, but it was beginning to lose its appeal by the time the accident shook me up. I suppose it's understandable that whatever you set out to exclude from the pattern of your life eventually comes to seem like a lack, and then an unfulfilled need.

After a few years more, I began to hunger once again for the spontaneity and abandonment of warmer climes. I decided there'd be time enough to celebrate the advent of the Ice Age when the glaciers had reached the full extent of their reclaimed empire, and that I might as well make what use I could of Gaea's temporary fever before it cooled. I moved to Venezuela, to dwell in the gloriously restored jungles of the Orinoco amid their teeming wildlife.

Following the destruction of much of the southern part of the continent in the second nuclear war, Venezuela had attained a cultural hegemony in South America that it had never surrendered. Brazil and Argentina had long since recovered, both economically and ecologically, from their disastrous fit of ill temper, but Venezuela was still the home of the *avant garde* of the Americas. It was there, for the first time, that I came into close contact with Thanaticism.

The original Thanatic cults had flourished in the twenty-eighth century. They had appeared among the last generations of children born without Zaman transformations; their members were people who, denied

emortality through blastular engineering, had perversely elected to reject the benefits of rejuvenation too, making a fetish out of living only a "natural" lifespan. At the time, it had seemed likely that they would be the last of the many Millenarian cults which had long afflicted Western culture, and they had quite literally died out some eighty or ninety years before I was born.

Nobody had then thought it possible, let alone likely, that genetically endowed emortals would ever embrace Thanaticism, but they were wrong.

There had always been suicides in the emortal population—indeed, suicide was the commonest cause of death among emortals, outnumbering accidental deaths by a factor of three—but such acts were usually covert and normally involved people who had lived at least a hundred years. The neo-Thanatics were not only indiscreet—their whole purpose seemed to be to make a public spectacle of themselves—but also young; people over seventy were held to have violated the Thanaticist ethic simply by surviving to that age.

Thanatics tended to choose violent means of death, and usually issued invitations as well as choosing their moments so that large crowds could gather. Jumping from tall buildings and burning to death were the most favored means in the beginning, but these quickly ceased to be interesting. As the Thanatic revival progressed, adherents of the movement sought increasingly bizarre methods in the interests of capturing attention and out-doing their predecessors. For these reasons, it was impossible for anyone living alongside the cults to avoid becoming implicated in their rites, if only as a spectator.

By the time I had been in Venezuela for a year, I had seen five people die horribly. After the first, I had resolved to turn away from any others, so as not to lend even minimal support to the practice, but I soon found that I had underestimated the difficulty of so doing. There was no excuse to be found in my vocation; thousands of people who were not historians of death found it equally impossible to resist the fascination.

I believed at first that the fad would soon pass, after wasting the lives of a handful of neurotics, but the cults continued to grow. Gaea's fever might be cooling, its crisis having passed, but the delirium of human culture had evidently not yet reached what Ziru Majumdar called "the cutting edge of experience."

8

The fourth volume of Mortimer Gray's *History of Death,* entitled *Fear and Fascination,* was published on 12 February 2977. In spite of being mute and motionless it was immediately subject to heavy access-demand, presumably in consequence of the world's increasing fascination with the "problem" of neo-Thanaticism. Requisitions of the earlier volumes of Gray's history had picked up worldwide during the early 2970s, but the

author had not appreciated what this might mean in terms of the demand for the new volume, and might have set a higher access fee had he realized.

Academic historians were universal in their condemnation of the new volume, possibly because of the enthusiasm with which it was greeted by laymen, but popular reviewers adored it. Its arguments were recklessly plundered by journalists and other broadcasting pundits in search of possible parallels that might be drawn with the modern world, especially those that seemed to carry moral lessons for the Thanatics and their opponents.

Fear and Fascination extended, elaborated, and diversified the arguments contained in its immediate predecessor, particularly in respect of the Christian world of the Medieval period and the Renaissance. It had much to say about art and literature, and the images contained therein. It had chapters on the personification of Death as the Grim Reaper, on the iconography of the *danse macabre,* on the topics of *memento mori* and *artes moriendi.* It had long analyses of Dante's *Divine Comedy,* the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch, Milton's *Paradise Lost,* and graveyard poetry. These were by no means exercises in conventional literary criticism; they were elements of a long and convoluted argument about the contributions made by the individual creative imagination to the war of ideas which raged on the only battleground on which man could as yet constructively oppose the specter of death.

Gray also dealt with the persecution of heretics and the subsequent elaboration of Christian Demonology, which led to the witch-craze of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. He gave considerable attention to various thriving folklore traditions which confused the notion of death, especially to the popularity of fictions and fears regarding premature burial, ghosts, and the various species of the "undead" who rose from their graves as ghouls or vampires. In Gray's eyes, all these phenomena were symptomatic of a crisis in Western man's imaginative dealings with the idea of death: a feverish heating up of a conflict which had been in danger of becoming desultory. The cities of men had been under perpetual siege from Death since the time of their first building, but now—in one part of the world, at least—the perception of that siege had sharpened. A kind of spiritual starvation and panic had set in, and the progress that had been made in the war by virtue of the ideological imperialism of Christ's Holy Cross now seemed imperiled by disintegration. This Empire of Faith was breaking up under the stress of skepticism, and men were faced with the prospect of going into battle against their most ancient enemy with their armor in tatters.

Just as the Protestants were trying to replace the Catholic Church's centralized authority with a more personal relationship between men and God, Gray argued, so the creative artists of this era were trying to achieve a more personal and more intimate form of reconciliation between men and Death, equipping individuals with the power to mount

their own ideative assaults. He drew some parallels between what happened in the Christian world and similar periods of crisis which he found in different cultures at different times, but other historians claimed that his analogies were weak, and that he was overgeneralizing. Some argued that his intense study of the phenomena associated with the idea of death had become too personal, and suggested that he had become infatuated with the ephemeral ideas of past ages to the point where they were taking over his own imagination.

9

At first, I found celebrity status pleasing, and the extra credit generated by my access fees was certainly welcome, even to a man of moderate tastes and habits. The unaccustomed touch of fame brought a fresh breeze into a life that might have been in danger of becoming bogged down.

To begin with, I was gratified to be reckoned an expert whose views on Thanaticism were to be taken seriously, even by some Thanatics. I received a veritable deluge of invitations to appear on the talk shows that were the staple diet of contemporary broadcasting, and for a while I accepted as many as I could conveniently accommodate within the pattern of my life.

I have no need to rely on my memories in recapitulating these episodes, because they remain on record—but by the same token, I needn't quote extensively from them. In the early days, when I was a relatively new face, my interrogators mostly started out by asking for information about my book, and their opening questions were usually stolen from uncharitable reviews.

"Some people feel that you've been carried away, Mr. Gray," more than one combative interviewer sneeringly began, "and that what started out as a sober history is fast becoming an obsessive rant. Did you decide to get personal in order to boost your sales?"

My careful cultivation of neo-Epicureanism and my years in Antarctica had left a useful legacy of calm formality; I always handled such accusations with punctilious politeness.

"Of course the war against death is a personal matter," I would reply. "It's a personal matter for everyone, mortal or emortal. Without that sense of personal relevance it would be impossible to put oneself imaginatively in the place of the people of the ancient past so as to obtain empathetic insight into their affairs. If I seem to be making heroes of the men of the past by describing their crusades, it's because they *were* heroes, and if my contemporaries find inspiration in my work, it's because they too are heroes in the same cause. The engineering of emortality has made us victors in the war, but we desperately need to retain a proper sense of triumph. We ought to celebrate our victory over death as joyously as possible, lest we lose our appreciation of its fruits."

My interviewers always appreciated that kind of link, which handed them their next question on a plate. "Is that what you think of the Thanatics?" they would follow up, eagerly.

It was, and I would say so at any length they considered appropriate.

Eventually, my interlocutors no longer talked about my book, taking it for granted that everyone knew who I was and what I'd done. They'd cut straight to the chase, asking me what I thought of the latest Thanaticist publicity stunt.

Personally, I thought the media's interest in Thanaticism was exaggerated. All death was, of course, news in a world populated almost entirely by emortals, and the Thanatics took care to be newsworthy by making such a song and dance about what they were doing, but the number of individuals involved was very small. In a world population of nearly three billion, a hundred deaths per week was a drop in the ocean, and "quiet" suicides still outnumbered the ostentatious Thanatics by a factor of five or six throughout the 2980s. The public debates quickly expanded to take in other issues. Subscription figures for net access to videotapes and teletexts concerned with the topic of violent death came under scrutiny, and everyone began talking about the "new pornography of death" —although fascination with such material had undoubtedly been widespread for many years.

"Don't you feel, Mr. Gray," I was often asked, "that a continued fascination with death in a world where everyone has a potential lifespan of several centuries is rather *sick?* Shouldn't we have put such matters behind us?"

"Not at all," I replied, earnestly and frequently. "In the days when death was inescapable, people were deeply frustrated by this imperious imposition of fate. They resented it with all the force and bitterness they could muster, but it could not be truly fascinating while it remained a simple and universal fact of life. Now that death is no longer a necessity, it has perforce become a luxury. Because it is no longer inevitable, we no longer feel such pressure to hate and fear it, and this frees us so that we may take an essentially *aesthetic* view of death. The transformation of the imagery of death into a species of pornography is both understandable and healthy."

"But such material surely encourages the spread of Thanaticism. You can't possibly approve of that?"

Actually, the more I was asked it the less censorious I became, at least for a while.

"Planning a life," I explained to a whole series of faces, indistinguishable by virtue of having been sculptured according to the latest theory of telegenicity, "is an exercise in story-making. Living people are forever writing the narratives of their own lives, deciding who to be and what to do, according to various aesthetic criteria. In olden days, death was inevitably seen as an *interruption* of the business of life, cutting short life-stories before they were—in the eyes of their creators—complete.

Nowadays, people have the opportunity to plan *whole* lives, deciding exactly when and how their life-stories should reach a climax and a conclusion. We may not share their aesthetic sensibilities, and may well think them fools, but there is a discernible logic in their actions. They are neither mad nor evil."

Perhaps I was reckless in adopting this point of view, or at least in proclaiming it to the whole world. By proposing that the new Thanatics were simply individuals who had a particular kind of aesthetic sensibility, tending toward conciseness and melodrama rather than prolixity and anti-climax, I became something of a hero to the cultists themselves—which was not my intention. The more lavishly I embroidered my chosen analogy—declaring that ordinary emortals were the *feuilletonistes,* epic poets, and three-decker novelists of modern life while Thanatics were the prose-poets and short-story writers who liked to sign off with a neat punch line—the more they liked me. I received many invitations to attend suicides, and my refusal to take them up only served to make my presence a prize to be sought after.

I was, of course, entirely in agreement with the United Nations Charter of Human Rights, whose ninety-ninth amendment guaranteed the citizens of every nation the right to take their own lives, and to be assisted in making a dignified exit should they so desire, but I had strong reservations about the way in which the Thanaticists construed the amendment. Its original intention had been to facilitate self-administered euthanasia in an age when that was sometimes necessary, not to guarantee Thanatics the entitlement to recruit whatever help they required in staging whatever kinds of exit they desired. Some of the invitations I received were exhortations to participate in legalized murders, and these became more common as time went by and the cults became more extreme in their bizarrerie.

In the 2980s, the Thanatics had progressed from conventional suicides to public executions, by rope, sword, axe, or guillotine. At first, the executioners were volunteers—and one or two were actually arrested and charged with murder, although none could be convicted—but the Thanatics were not satisfied even with this, and began campaigning for various nations to recreate the official position of Public Executioner, together with bureaucratic structures that would give all citizens the right to call upon the services of such officials. Even I, who claimed to understand the cults better than their members, was astonished when the government of Colombia—which was jealous of Venezuela's reputation as the home of the world's *avant garde*—actually accepted such an obligation, with the result that Thanatics began to flock to Maracaibo and Cartagena in order to obtain an appropriate send-off. I was profoundly relieved when the UN, following the crucifixion of Shamiel Sihra in 2991, revised the wording of the amendment and outlawed suicide by public execution.

By this time, I was automatically refusing invitations to appear on 3-V in much the same way that I was refusing invitations to take part in Thanaticist ceremonies. It was time to become a recluse once again.

* * *

I left Venezuela in 2989 to take up residence on Cape Wolstenholme, at the neck of Hudson's Bay. Canada was an urbane, highly civilized, and rather staid confederacy of states whose people had no time for such follies as Thanaticism; it provided an ideal retreat where I could throw myself wholeheartedly into my work again.

I handed over full responsibility for answering all my calls to a state-of-the-art Personal Simulation program, which grew so clever and so ambitious with practice that it began to give live interviews on broadcast television. Although it offered what was effectively no comment in a carefully elaborate fashion I eventually thought it best to introduce a block into its operating system—a block that ensured that my face dropped out of public sight for half a century.

Having once experienced the rewards and pressures of fame, I never felt the need to seek them again. I can't and won't say that I learned as much from that phase in my life as I learned from any of my close encounters with death, but I still remember it—vaguely—with a certain nostalgia. Unmelodramatic it might have been, but it doubtless played its part in shaping the person that I now am. It certainly made me more self-assured in public.

10

The fifth volume of Mortimer Gray's *History of Death,* entitled *The War of Attrition,* was published on 19 March 2999. It marked a return to the cooler and more comprehensive style of scholarship exhibited by the first two volumes. It dealt with the history of medical science and hygiene up to the end of the nineteenth century, thus concerning itself with a new and very different arena of the war between mankind and mortality.

To many of its readers *The War of Attrition* was undoubtedly a disappointment, though it did include some material about Victorian tomb-decoration and nineteenth century spiritualism that carried forward arguments from volume four. Access was initially widespread, although demand tailed off fairly rapidly when it was realized how vast and how tightly packed with data the document was. This lack of popular enthusiasm was not counterbalanced by any redemption of Mortimer's academic reputation; like many earlier scholars who had made contact with a popular audience, Gray was considered guilty of a kind of intellectual treason, and was frozen out of the scholarly community in spite of what appeared to be a determined attempt at rehabilitation. Some popular reviewers argued, however, that there was much in the new volume to intrigue the inhabitants of a world whose medical science was so adept that almost everyone enjoyed perfect health as well as eternal youth, and in which almost any injury could be repaired completely. It was suggested that there was a certain piquant delight to be obtained from

recalling a world where everyone was (by modern standards) crippled or deformed, and in which everyone suffered continually from illnesses of a most horrific nature.

Although it had a wealth of scrupulously dry passages, there were parts of *The War of Attrition* that were deemed pornographic by some commentators. Its accounts of the early history of surgery and midwifery were condemned as unjustifiably blood-curdling, and its painstaking analysis of the spread of syphilis through Europe in the sixteenth century was censured as a mere horror-story made all the nastier by its clinical narration. Gray was particularly interested in syphilis, because of the dramatic social effects of its sudden advent in Europe and its significance in the development of prophylactic medicine. He argued that syphilis was primarily responsible for the rise and spread of Puritanism, repressive sexual morality being the only truly effective weapon against its spread. He then deployed well-tried sociological arguments to the effect that Puritanism and its associated habits of thought had been importantly implicated in the rapid development of Capitalism in the Western World, in order that he might claim that syphilis ought to be regarded as the root cause of the economic and political systems that came to dominate the most chaotic, the most extravagantly progressive, and the most extravagantly destructive centuries of human history.

The history of medicine and the conquest of disease were, of course, topics of elementary education in the thirtieth century. There was supposedly not a citizen of any nation to whom the names of Semmelweis, Jenner, and Pasteur were unknown—but disease had been so long banished from the world, and it was so completely outside the experience of ordinary men and women, that what they "knew" about it was never really brought to consciousness, and never came alive to the imagination. Words like "smallpox," "plague," and "cancer" were used metaphorically in common parlance, and over the centuries had become virtually empty of any real significance. Gray's fifth volume, therefore—despite the fact that it contained little that was really new—did serve as a stimulus to collective memory. It reminded the world of some issues which, though not exactly forgotten, had not really been *brought to mind* for some time. It is at least arguable that it touched off ripples whose movement across the collective consciousness of world culture was of some moment. Mortimer Gray was no longer famous, but his continuing work had become firmly established within the *zeitgeist*.

11

Neo-Thanaticism began to peter out as the turn of the century approached. By 3010, the whole movement had "gone underground"—which is to say that Thanatics no longer staged their exits before the largest audiences they could attain, but saved their performance for small, carefully selected groups. This wasn't so much a response to perse-

cution as a variation in the strange game that they were playing out; it was simply a different kind of drama. Unfortunately, there was no let up in the communications with which Thanatics continued to batter my patient AI interceptors.

Although it disappointed the rest of the world, *The War of Attrition* was welcomed enthusiastically by some of the Thanatic cults, whose members cultivated an altogether unhealthy interest in disease as a means of decease, replacing the violent executions that had become too familiar. As time went by and Thanaticism declined generally, this particular subspecies underwent a kind of mutation, as the cultists began to promote diseases not as means of death but as valuable *experiences* from which much might be learned. A black market in carcinogens and bioengineered pathogens quickly sprang up. The original agents of smallpox, cholera, bubonic plague, and syphilis were long since extinct, but the world abounded in clever genetic engineers who could synthesize a virus with very little effort. Suddenly, they began to find clients for a whole range of horrid diseases. Those which afflicted the mind as well as or instead of the body were particularly prized; there was a boom in recreational schizophrenia that almost broke through to the mainstream of accredited psychotropics.

I couldn't help but remember, with a new sense of irony, Ziru Majumdar's enthusiasm for the vivid delusions which had visited him while his internal technology was tested to the limit in staving off hypothermia and frostbite.

When the new trend spread beyond the ranks of the Thanaticists, and large numbers of people began to regard disease as something that could be temporarily and interestingly indulged in without any real danger to life or subsequent health, I began to find my arguments about death quoted—without acknowledgment—with reference to *disease*. A popular way of talking about the phenomenon was to claim that what had ceased to be a dire necessity "naturally" became available as a perverse luxury.

None of this would have mattered much had it not been for the difficulty of restricting the spread of recreational diseases to people who *wanted* to indulge, but those caught up in the fad refused to restrict themselves to non-infectious varieties. There had been no serious threat of epidemic since the Plague Wars of the twenty-first century, but now it seemed that medical science might once again have to be mobilized on a vast scale. Because of the threat to innocent parties who might be accidently infected, the self-infliction of dangerous diseases was quickly outlawed in many nations, but some governments were slow to act.

I would have remained aloof and apart from all of this had I been able to, but it turned out that my defenses weren't impregnable. In 3029, a Thanaticist of exceptional determination named Hadria Nuccoli decided that if I wouldn't come to her, she would come to *me*. Somehow, she succeeded in getting past all my carefully sealed doors, to arrive in my bedroom at three o'clock one winter morning.

I woke up in confusion, but the confusion was quickly transformed into sheer terror. This was an enemy more frightening than the scalding Coral Sea, because this was an *active* enemy who meant to do me harm—and the intensity of the threat which she posed was in no way lessened by the fact that she claimed to be doing it out of love rather than hatred.

The woman's skin bore an almost mercuric luster, and she was in the grip of a terrible fever, but she would not be still. She seemed, in fact, to have an irresistible desire to move and to communicate, and the derangement of her body and brain had not impaired her crazed eloquence.

"Come with me!" she begged, as I tried to evade her eager clutch. "Come with me to the far side of death and I'll show you what's there. There's no need to be afraid! Death isn't the end, it's the beginning. It's the metamorphosis that frees us from our caterpillar flesh to be spirits in a massless world of light and color. I am your redeemer, for whom you have waited far too long. Love me, dear Mortimer Gray, only *love* me, and you will learn. Let me be your mirror; drown yourself in me!"

For ten minutes, I succeeded in keeping away from her, stumbling this way and that, thinking that I might be safe if only I didn't touch her. I managed to send out a call for help, but I knew it would take an hour or more for anyone to come.

I tried all the while to talk her down, but it was impossible.

"There's no return from eternity," she told me. "This is no ordinary virus created by accident to fight a hopeless cause against the defenses of the body. Nanotechnology is as impotent to deal with this transformer of the flesh as the immune system was to deal with its own destroyers. The true task of medical engineers, did they but know it, was never to fight disease, but always to *perfect* it, and we have found the way. I bring you the greatest of all gifts, my darling: the elixir of life, which will make us angels instead of men, creatures of light and ecstasy!"

It was no use running; I tired before she did, and she caught me. I tried to knock her down, and if I had had a weapon to hand, I would certainly have used it in self-defense, but she couldn't feel pain, and no matter how badly disabled her internal technology was, I wasn't able to injure her with my blows.

In the end, I had no sensible alternative but to let her take me in her arms and cling to me; nothing else would soothe her.

I was afraid for her as well as myself; I didn't believe that she truly intended to die, and I wanted to keep us safe until help arrived.

My panic didn't decrease while I held her; if anything, I felt it all the more intensely. I became outwardly calmer once I had let her touch me, and made every effort to remind myself that it didn't really matter whether she infected me or not, given that medical help would soon arrive. I didn't expect to have to go through the kind of hell that I actually endured before the doctors got the bug under control; for once, panic was wiser than common sense.

Even so, I wept for her when they told me that she'd died, and wished with all my heart that she hadn't.

* * *

Unlike my previous brushes with death, I don't think my encounter with Hadria Nuccoli was an important learning experience. It was just a disturbance of the now-settled pattern of my life—something to be survived, put away, and forgotten. I haven't forgotten it, but I did put it away in the back of my mind. I didn't let it affect me.

In some of my writings, I'd lauded the idea of martyrdom as an important invention in the imaginative war against death, and I'd been mightily intrigued by the lives and deaths of the saints recorded in the *Golden Legend.* Now that I'd been appointed a saint myself by some very strange people, though, I began to worry about the exemplary functions of such legends. The last thing I'd expected when I set out to write a *History of Death* was that my explanatory study might actually *assist* the dread empire of Death to regain a little of the ground that it had lost in the world of human affairs. I began to wonder whether I ought to abandon my project, but I decided otherwise. The Thanatics and their successors were, after all, wilfully misunderstanding and perverting my message; I owed it to them and to everyone else to make myself clearer.

As it happened, the number of deaths recorded in association with Thanaticism and recreational disease began to decline after 3030. In a world context, the numbers were never more than tiny, but they were still worrying, and hundreds of thousands of people had, like me, to be rescued by doctors from the consequences of their own or other people's folly.

As far back as 2982, I had appeared on TV—*via* a satellite link—with a faber named Khan Mirafzal, who had argued that Thanaticism was evidence of the fact that Earthbound man was becoming decadent, and that the future of man lay outside the Earth, in the microworlds and the distant colonies. Mirafzal had claimed that men genetically reshaped for life in low gravity—like the four-handed fabers—or for the colonization of alien worlds, would find Thanaticism unthinkable. At the time, I'd been content to assume that his arguments were spurious. People who lived in space were always going on about the decadence of the Earthbound, much as the Gaean Liberationists did. Fifty years later, I wasn't so sure. I actually called Mirafzal so that we could discuss the matter again, in private. The conversation took a long time because of the signal delay, but that seemed to make its thrust all the more compelling.

I decided to leave Earth, at least for a while, to investigate the farther horizons of the human enterprise.

In 3033 I flew to the Moon, and took up residence in Mare Moscoviense—which is, of course, on the side which faces away from the Earth.

12

The sixth volume of Mortimer Gray's *History of Death,* entitled *Fields of Battle,* was published on 24 July 3044. Its subject-matter was war,

but Gray was not greatly interested in the actual fighting of the wars of the nineteenth and succeeding centuries. His main concern was with the *mythology* of warfare as it developed in the period under consideration, and, in particular, with the way that the development of the mass media of communication transformed the business and the perceived meanings of warfare. He began his study with the Crimean War, because it was the first war to be extensively covered by newspaper reporters, and the first whose conduct was drastically affected thereby.

Before the Crimea, Gray argued, wars had been "private" events, entirely the affairs of the men who started them and the men who fought them. They might have a devastating effect on the local population of the areas where they were fought, but were largely irrelevant to distant civilian populations. The British *Times* had changed all that, by making the Crimean War the business of all its readers, exposing the government and military leaders to public scrutiny and to public scorn. Reports from the front had scandalized the nation by creating an awareness of how ridiculously inefficient the organization of the army was, and what a toll of human life was exacted upon the troops in consequence—not merely deaths in battle, but deaths from injury and disease caused by the appalling lack of care given to wounded soldiers. That reportage had not only had practical consequences, but *imaginative* consequences—it rewrote the entire mythology of heroism in an intricate webwork of new legends, ranging from the Charge of the Light Brigade to the secular canonization of Florence Nightingale.

Throughout the next two centuries, Gray argued, war and publicity were entwined in a Gordian knot. Control of the news media became vital to propagandist control of popular *morale,* and governments engaged in war had to become architects of the mythology of war as well as planners of military strategy. Heroism and jingoism became the currency of consent; where governments failed to secure the public image of the wars they fought, they fell. Gray tracked the way in which attitudes to death in war and to the endangerment of civilian populations by war were dramatically transformed by the three World Wars and by the way those wars were subsequently mythologized in memory and fiction. He commented extensively on the way the First World War was "sold," to those who must fight it, as a war to *end* war—and on the consequent sense of betrayal that followed when it failed to live up to this billing. And yet, he argued, if the three global wars were seen as a whole, its example really *had* brought into being the attitude of mind which ultimately forbade wars.

As those who had become used to his methods now expected, Gray dissented from the view of other modern historians who saw the World Wars as an unmitigated disaster and a horrible example of the barbarity of ancient man. He agreed that the nationalism that had replaced the great religions as the main creator and definer of a sense of community was a poor and petty thing, and that the massive conflicts that it engendered were tragic—but it was, he asserted, a necessary stage in historical

development. The empires of faith were, when all was said and done, utterly incompetent to their self-defined task, and were always bound to fail and to disintegrate. The groundwork for a *genuine* human community, in which all mankind could properly and meaningfully join, had to be relaid, and it had to be relaid in the common experience of all nations, as part of a universal heritage.

The *real* enemy of mankind was, as Gray had always insisted and now continued to insist, death itself. Only by facing up to death in a new way, by gradually transforming the role of death as part of the means to human ends, could a true human community be made. Wars, whatever their immediate purpose in settling economic squabbles and pandering to the megalomaniac psychoses of national leaders, also served a large-scale function in the shifting pattern of history: to provide a vast carnival of destruction which must either weary men of the lust to kill, or bring about their extinction.

Some reviewers condemned *Fields of Battle* on the grounds of its evident irrevelance to a world that had banished war, but others welcomed the fact that the volume returned Gray's thesis to the safe track of true history, in dealing exclusively with that which was safely dead and buried.

13

I found life on the Moon very different from anything I'd experienced in my travels around the Earth's surface. It wasn't so much the change in gravity, although that certainly took a lot of getting used to, nor the severe regime of daily exercise in the centrifuge which I had to adopt in order to make sure that I might one day return to the world of my birth without extravagant medical provision. Nor was it the fact that the environment was so comprehensively artificial, or that it was impossible to venture outside without special equipment; in those respects it was much like Antarctica. The most significant difference was in the people.

Mare Moscoviense had few tourists—tourists mostly stayed Earthside, making only brief trips farside—but most of its inhabitants were nevertheless just passing through. It was one of the main jumping-off points for emigrants, largely because it was an important industrial center, the home of one of the largest factories for the manufacture of shuttles and other local-space vehicles. It was one of the chief trading posts supplying materials to the microworlds in Earth orbit and beyond, and many of its visitors came in from the farther reaches of the solar system.

The majority of the city's long-term residents were unmodified, like me, or lightly modified by reversible cyborgization, but a great many of those visiting were fabers, genetically engineered for low-gee environments. The most obvious external feature of their modification was that they had an extra pair of "arms" instead of "legs," and this meant that

most of the public places in Moscoviense were designed to accommodate their kind as well as "walkers"; all the corridors were railed and all the ceilings ringed.

The sight of fabers swinging around the place like gibbons, getting everywhere at five or six times the pace of walkers, was one that I found strangely fascinating, and one to which I never quite became accustomed. Fabers couldn't live, save with the utmost difficulty, in the gravity well that was Earth; they almost never descended to the planet's surface. By the same token, it was very difficult for men from Earth to work in zero-gee environments without extensive modification, surgical if not genetic. For this reason, the only "ordinary" men who went into the true faber environments weren't ordinary by any customary standard. The Moon, with its one-sixth Earth gravity, was the only place in the inner solar system where fabers and unmodified men frequently met and mingled—there was nowhere else nearer than Ganymede.

I had always known about fabers, of course, but, like so much other "common" knowledge, the information had lain unattended in some unheeded pigeon-hole of memory until direct acquaintance ignited it and gave it life. It seemed to me that fabers lived their lives at a very rapid tempo, despite the fact that they were just as emortal as members of their parent species.

For one thing, faber parents normally had their children while they were still alive, and very often had several at intervals of only twenty or thirty years! An aggregate family usually had three or even four children growing up in parallel. In the infinite reaches of space, there was no population control, and no restrictive "right of replacement." A microworld's population could grow as fast as the microworld could put on extra mass. Then again, the fabers were always *doing* things. Even though they had four arms, they always seemed to have trouble finding a spare hand. They seemed to have no difficulty at all in doing two different things at the same time, often using only one limb for attachment—on the moon this generally meant hanging from the ceiling like a bat—while one hand mediated between the separate tasks being carried out by the remaining two.

I quickly realized that it wasn't just the widely accepted notion that the future of mankind must take the form of a gradual diffusion through the galaxy that made the fabers think of Earth as decadent. From their viewpoint, Earth-life seemed unbearably slow and sedentary. Unmodified mankind, having long since attained control of the ecosphere of its native world, seemed to the fabers to be living a lotus-eater existence, indolently pottering about in its spacious garden.

The fabers weren't contemptuous of legs as such, but they drew a sharp distinction between those spacefaring folk who were given legs by the genetic engineers in order to descend to the surfaces of new and alien worlds, with a job to do, and those Earthbound people who simply kept the legs their ancestors had bequeathed to them in order to enjoy the fruits of the labors of past generations.

* * *

Wherever I had lived on Earth, it had always seemed to me that one could blindly throw a stone into a crowded room and stand a fifty-fifty change of hitting a historian of some sort. In Mare Moscoviense, the population of historians could be counted on the fingers of an unmodified man—and that in a city of a quarter of a million people. Whether they were resident or passing through, the people of the Moon were far more interested in the future than the past. When I told them about my vocation, my new neighbors were likely to smile politely and shake their heads.

"It's the weight of those *legs,*" the fabers among them were wont to say. "You think they're holding you up, but in fact they're holding you down. Give them a chance and you'll find that you've put down roots."

If anyone told them that on Earth, "having roots" wasn't considered an altogether bad thing, they'd laugh.

"Get rid of your legs and learn to swing," they'd say. "You'll understand then that *human* beings have no need of roots. Only reach with four hands instead of two, and you'll find the stars within your grasp! Leave the past to rot at the bottom of the deep dark well, and give the Heavens their due."

I quickly learned to fall back on the same defensive moves most of my unmodified companions employed. "You can't break all your links with solid ground," we told the fabers, over and over again. "Somebody has to deal with the larger lumps of matter which are strewn about the universe, and you can't go to meet real mass if you don't have legs. It's planets that produce biospheres and biospheres that produce such luxuries as air. If you've seen further than other men it's not because you can swing by your arms from the ceiling—it's because you can stand on the shoulders of giants with legs."

Such exchanges were always cheerful. It was almost impossible to get into a real argument with a faber; their talk was as intoxicated as their movements. "Leave the wells to the unwell," they were fond of quoting. "The well will climb *out* of the wells, if they only find the will. History is bunk, only fit for sleeping minds."

A man less certain of his own destiny might have been turned aside from his task by faber banter, but I was well into my second century of life by then, and I had few doubts left regarding the propriety of my particular labor. Access to data was no more difficult on the Moon than anywhere else in the civilized Ekumen, and I proceeded, steadily and methodically, with my self-allotted task.

I made good progress there, as befitted the circumstances. Perhaps that was the happiest time of my life—but it's very difficult to draw comparisons when you're as far from childhood and youth as I now am.

Memory is an untrustworthy crutch for minds that have not yet mastered eternity.

The seventh volume of Mortimer Gray's *History of Death,* entitled *The Last Judgment,* was published on 21 June 3053. It dealt with the multiple crises that had developed in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, each of which and all of which had faced the human race with the prospect of extinction.

Gray described in minute detail the various nuclear exchanges which led up to Brazil's nuclear attack on Argentina in 2079 and the Plague Wars waged throughout that century. He discussed the various factors—the greenhouse crisis, soil erosion, pollution, and deforestation—that had come close to inflicting irreparable damage on the ecosphere. His map of the patterns of death in this period considered in detail the fate of the "lost billions" of peasant and subsistence farmers who were disinherited and displaced by the emergent ecological and economic order. Gray scrupulously pointed out that in less than two centuries more people had died than in the previous ten millennia. He made the ironic observation that the near-conquest of death achieved by twenty-first century medicine had created such an abundance of life as to precipitate a Malthusian crisis of awful proportions. He proposed that the new medicine and the new pestilences might be seen as different faces of the same coin, and that new technologies of food production—from the twentieth century Green Revolution to twenty-second century tissue-culture farmfactories—were as much progenitors of famine as of satiation.

Gray advanced the opinion that this was the most critical of all the stages of man's war with death. The weapons of the imagination were discarded in favor of more effective ones, but, in the short term, those more effective weapons, by multiplying life so effectively, had also multiplied death. In earlier times, the growth of human population had been restricted by lack of resources, and the war with death had been, in essence, a war of mental adaptation whose goal was reconciliation. When the "natural" checks on population growth were removed because that reconciliation was abandoned, the waste-products of human society threatened to poison it. Humankind, in developing the weapons by which the long war with death might be won, had also developed—in a more crudely literal sense—the weapons by which it might be lost. Nuclear arsenals and stockpiled AIDS viruses were scattered all over the globe: twin pistols held in the skeletal hands of death, leveled at the entire human race. The wounds they inflicted could so easily have been mortal—but the dangerous corner had, after all, been turned. The sciences of life, having passed through a particularly desperate stage of their evolution, kept one vital step ahead of the problems that they had helped to generate. Food technology finally achieved a merciful divorce from the bounty of nature, moving out of the fields and into the factories to achieve a complete liberation of man from the vagaries of the ecosphere, and paving the way for Garden Earth.

Gray argued that this was a remarkable triumph of human sanity which produced a political apparatus enabling human beings to take collective control of themselves, allowing the entire world to be managed and governed as a whole. He judged that the solution was far from Utopian, and that the political apparatus in question was at best a ramshackle and ill-designed affair, but admitted that it did the job. He emphasized that in the final analysis it was *not* scientific progress *per se* which had won the war against death, but the ability of human beings to work together, to compromise, to build communities. That human beings possessed this ability was, he argued, as much the legacy of thousands of years of superstition and religion as of hundreds of years of science.

The Last Judgment attracted little critical attention, as it was widely held to be dealing with matters that everyone understood very well. Given that the period had left an abundant legacy of archival material of all kinds, Gray's insistence on using only mute text accompanied by still photographs seemed to many commentators to be pedestrian and frankly perverse, unbecoming a true historian.

15

In twenty years of living beneath a star-filled sky, I was strongly affected by the magnetic pull that those stars seemed to exert upon my spirit. I seriously considered applying for modification for low-gee and shipping out from Mare Moscoviense along with the emigrants to some new microworld, or perhaps going out to one of the satellites of Saturn or Uranus, to a world where the sun's bountiful radiance was of little consequence and men lived entirely by the fruits of their own efforts and their own wisdom.

But the years drifted by, and I didn't go.

Sometimes, I thought of this failure as a result of cowardice, or evidence of the decadence that the fabers and other subspecies attributed to the humans of Earth. I sometimes imagined myself as an insect born at the bottom of a deep cave, who had—thanks to the toil of many preceding generations of insects—been brought to the rim from which I could look out at the great world, but who dared not take the one final step that would carry me out and away. More and more, however, I found my thoughts turning back to the Earth. My memories of its many environments became gradually fonder the longer my absence lasted. Nor could I despise this as a weakness. Earth was, after all, my home. It was not only *my* world, but the home world of *all* humankind. No matter what the fabers and their kin might say, the Earth was and would always remain an exceedingly precious thing, which should never be abandoned.

It seemed to me then—and still seems now—that it would be a terrible thing were men to spread themselves across the entire galaxy, taking a

multitude of forms in order to occupy a multitude of alien worlds, and in the end forget entirely the world from which their ancestors had sprung.

Once, I was visited in Mare Moscoviense by Khan Mirafzal, the faber with whom I had long ago debated on TV, and talked with again before my emigration. His home, for the moment, was a microworld in the asteroid belt that was in the process of being fitted with a drive that would take it out of the system and into the infinite. He was a kind and even-tempered man who would not dream of trying to convince me of the error of my ways, but he was also a man with a sublime vision who could not restrain his enthusiasm for his own chosen destiny.

"I have no roots on Earth, Mortimer, even in a metaphorical sense. In my being, the chains of adaptation have been decisively broken. Every man of my kind is born anew, designed and synthesized; we are *self-made men,* who belong everywhere and nowhere. The wilderness of empty space which fills the universe is our realm, our heritage. Nothing is strange to us, nothing foreign, nothing alien. Blastular engineering has incorporated freedom into our blood and our bones, and I intend to take full advantage of that freedom. To do otherwise would be a betrayal of my nature."

"My own blastular engineering served only to complete the adaptation to life on Earth which natural selection had left incomplete," I reminded him. "I'm no *new man,* free from the ties which bind me to the Earth."

"Not so," he replied. "Natural selection would never have devised emortality, for natural selection can only generate change by *death and replacement.* When genetic engineers found the means of setting aside the curse of aging, they put an end to *natural* selection forever. The first and greatest freedom is time, my friend, and you have all the time in the world. You can become whatever you want to be. What *do* you want to be, Mortimer?"

"An historian," I told him. "It's what I am because it's what I want to be."

"All well and good—but history isn't inexhaustible, as you well know. It ends with the present day, the present moment. The future, on the other hand . . ."

"Is given to your kind. I know that, Mira. I don't dispute it. But what exactly *is* your kind, given that you rejoice in such freedom to be anything you want to be? When the starship *Pandora* effected the first meeting between humans and a ship that set out from another star-system, the crews of the two ships, each consisting entirely of individuals bioengineered for life in zero-gee, resembled one another far more than they resembled unmodified members of their parent species. The fundamental chemistries controlling their design were different, but this only led to the faber crews trading their respective molecules of life, so that their genetic engineers could henceforth make and use chromosomes of both kinds. What kind of freedom is it that makes all the travelers of space into mirror images of one another?"

"You're exaggerating," Mirafzal insisted. "The news reports played up the similarity, but it really wasn't as close as all that. Yes, the *Pandora* encounter can't really be regarded as a first contact between humans and aliens, because the distinction between *human* and *alien* had ceased to carry any real meaning long before it happened. But it's not the case that our kind of freedom breeds universal mediocrity because adaptation to zero-gee is an existential straitjacket. We've hardly scratched the surface of constructive cyborgization, which will open up a whole new dimension of freedom."

"That's not for me," I told him. "Maybe it *is* just my legs weighing me down, but I'm well and truly addicted to gravity. I can't cast off the past like a worn-out surskin. I know you think I ought to envy you, but I don't. I dare say you think that I'm clinging like a terrified infant to Mother Earth while you're achieving true maturity, but I really do think it's important to have somewhere to *belong*."

"So do I," the faber said, quietly. "I just don't think that Earth is or ought to be that place. It's not where you start from that's important, Mortimer, it's where you're going."

"Not for an historian."

"For everybody. History ends, Mortimer, life doesn't—not any more."

I was at least half-convinced that Khan Mirafzal was right, although I didn't follow his advice. I still am. Maybe I was and am trapped in a kind of infancy, or a kind of lotus-eater decadence—but if so, I could see no way out of the trap then, and I still can't.

Perhaps things would have turned out differently if I'd had one of my close encounters with death while I was on the Moon, but I didn't. The dome in which I lived was only breached once, and the crack was sealed before there was any significant air-loss. It was a scare, but it wasn't a *threat*. Perhaps, in the end, the Moon was too much like Antarctica—but without the crevasses. Fortune seems to have decreed that all my significant formative experiences have to do with water, whether it be very hot or very, very cold.

Eventually, I gave in to my homesickness for Garden Earth and returned there, having resolved not to leave it again until my history of death was complete. I never did.

16

The eighth volume of Mortimer Gray's *History of Death,* entitled *The Fountains of Youth,* was published on 1 December 3064. It dealt with the development of elementary technologies of longevity and elementary technologies of cyborgization in the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth centuries. It tracked the progress of the new "politics of immortality," whose main focus was the new Charter of Human Rights, which sought to

establish a basic right to longevity for all. It also described the development of the Zaman transformations by which human blastulas could be engineered for longevity, which finally opened the way for the wholesale metamorphosis of the human race.

According to Gray, the Manifesto of the New Chartists was the vital treaty which ushered in a new phase in man's continuing war with death, because it defined the whole human community as a single army, united in all its interests. He quoted with approval and reverence the opening words of the document: "Man is born free, but is everywhere enchained by the fetters of death. In all times past men have been truly equal in one respect and one only: they have all borne the burden of age and decay. The day must soon dawn when this burden can be set aside; there will be a new freedom, and with this freedom must come a new equality. No man has the right to escape the prison of death while his fellows remain shackled within."

Gray carefully chronicled the long battle fought by the Chartists across the stage of world politics, describing it with a partisan fervor that had been largely absent from his work since the fourth volume. There was nothing clinical about his description of the "persecution" of Ali Zaman and the resistance offered by the community of nations to his proposal to make future generations truly emortal. Gray admitted that he had the benefits of hindsight, and that as a Zaman-transformed individual himself he was bound to have an attitude very different from Zaman's confused and cautious contemporaries, but he saw no reason to be entirely even-handed. From his viewpoint, those who initially opposed Zaman were traitors in the war against death, and he could find few excuses for them. In trying to preserve "human nature" against biotechnological intervention—or, at least, to confine such interventions by a mythos of medical "repair"—those men and women had, in his stern view, been willfully blind and negligent of the welfare of their own children.

Some critics charged Gray with inconsistency because he was not nearly so extravagant in his enthusiasm for the various kinds of symbiosis between organic and inorganic systems that were tried out in the period under consideration. His descriptions of experiments in cyborgization were indeed conspicuously cooler, not because he saw such endeavors as "unnatural," but rather because he saw them as only peripherally relevant to the war against death. He tended to lump together adventures in cyborgization with cosmetic biotechnology as symptoms of lingering anxiety regarding the presumed "tedium of emortality"—an anxiety which had led the first generations of long-lived people to lust for variety and "multidimensionality." Many champions of cyborgization and man/machine symbiosis, who saw their work as the new frontier of science, accused Gray of rank conservatism, suggesting that it was hypocritical of him, given that his mind was closed against *them*, to criticize so extravagantly those who, in less enlightened times, had closed their minds against Ali Zaman.

This controversy, which was dragged into the public arena by some

fierce attacks, helped in no small measure to boost access-demand for *The Fountains of Youth,* and nearly succeeded in restoring Mortimer Gray to the position of public pre-eminence that he had enjoyed a century before.

17

Following my return to the Earth's surface, I took up residence in Tonga, where the Continental Engineers were busy raising new islands by the dozen from the relatively shallow sea.

The Continental Engineers had borrowed their name from a twenty-fifth century group which tried to persuade the United Nations to license the building of a dam across the Straits of Gibraltar—which, because more water evaporates from the Mediterranean than flows into it from rivers, would have increased considerably the land surface of southern Europe and Northern Africa. That plan had, of course, never come to fruition, but the new Engineers had taken advantage of the climatic disruptions caused by the advancing Ice Age to promote the idea of raising new lands in the tropics to take emigrants from the nearly frozen north. Using a mixture of techniques—seeding the shallower sea with artificial "lightning corals" and using special gantzing organisms to agglomerate huge towers of cemented sand—the Engineers were creating a great archipelago of new islands, many of which they then connected up with huge bridges.

Between the newly raised islands, the ecologists who were collaborating with the Continental Engineers had planted vast networks of matted seaweeds: floral carpets extending over thousands of miles. The islands and their surroundings were being populated, and their ecosystems shaped, with the aid of the Creationists of Micronesia, whose earlier exploits I'd been prevented from exploring by the sinking of *Genesis.* I was delighted to have the opportunity of observing their new and bolder adventures at close range.

The Pacific sun set in its deep blue bed seemed fabulously luxurious after the silver-ceilinged domes of the Moon, and I gladly gave myself over to its governance. Carried away by the romance of it all, I married into an aggregate household which was forming in order to raise a child, and so—as I neared my two hundredth birthday—I became a parent for the first time. Five of the other seven members of the aggregate were ecological engineers, and had to spend a good deal of time traveling, so I became one of the constant presences in the life of the growing infant, who was a girl named Lua Tawana. I formed a relationship with her that seemed to me to be especially close.

In the meantime, I found myself constantly engaged in public argument with the self-styled Cyborganizers, who had chosen to make the latest volume of my history into a key issue in their bid for the kind of

public attention and sponsorship that the Continental Engineers had already won. I thought their complaints unjustified and irrelevant, but they obviously thought that by attacking me they could exploit the celebrity status I had briefly enjoyed. The gist of their argument was that the world had become so besotted with the achievements of genetic engineers that people had become blind to all kinds of other possibilities that lay beyond the scope of DNA-manipulation. They insisted that I was one of many contemporary writers who was "de-historicizing" cyborgization, making it seem that in the past and the present—and, by implication, the future—organic/inorganic integration and symbiosis were peripheral to the story of human progress. The Cyborganizers were willing to concede that some previous practitioners of their science had generated a lot of bad publicity, in the days of memory boxes and psychedelic synthesizers, but claimed that this had only served to mislead the public as to the true potential of their science.

In particular—and this was of particular relevance to me—the Cyborganizers insisted that the biotechnologists had only won one battle in the war against death, and that what was presently called "emortality" would eventually prove wanting. Zaman transformations, they conceded, had dramatically increased the human lifespan—so dramatically that no one yet knew for sure how long ZT people might live—but it was not yet proven that the extension would be effective for more than a few centuries. They did have a point; even the most optimistic supporters of Zaman transformations were reluctant to promise a lifespan of several millennia, and some kinds of aging processes—particularly those linked to DNA copying-errors—still affected emortals to some degree. Hundreds, if not thousands, of people still died every year from "age-related causes."

To find further scope for *authentic* immortality, the Cyborganizers claimed that it would be necessary to look to a combination of organic and inorganic technologies. What was needed by contemporary man, they said, was not just life, but *afterlife,* and afterlife would require some kind of transcription of the personality into an inorganic rather than an organic matrix. Whatever the advantages of flesh and blood, silicon lasted longer; and however clever genetic engineers became in adapting men for life in microworlds or on alien planets, only machine-makers could build entities capable of working in genuinely extreme environments.

The idea of "downloading" a human mind into an inorganic matrix was, of course, a very old one. It had been extensively if optimistically discussed in the days before the advent of emortality—at which point it had been marginalized as an apparent irrelevance. Mechanical "human analogues" and virtual simulacra had become commonplace alongside the development of longevity technologies, but the evolution of such "species" had so far been divergent rather than convergent. According to the Cyborganizers, it was now time for a change.

* * *

Although I didn't entirely relish being cast in the role of villain and bugbear, I made only half-hearted attempts to make peace with my self-appointed adversaries. I remained skeptical in respect of their grandiose schemes, and I was happy to dampen their ardor as best I could in public debate. I thought myself sufficiently mature to be unaffected by their insults, although it did sting when they sunk so low as to charge me with being a closet Thanaticist.

"Your interminable book is only posing as a history," Lok Cho Kam, perhaps the most outspoken of the younger Cyborganizers, once said when he challenged me to a broadcast debate. "It's actually an extended exercise in the *pornography* of death. Its silence and stillness aren't marks of scholarly dignity, they're a means of heightening response."

"That's absurd!" I said, but he wouldn't be put off.

"What sound arouses more excitation in today's world than the sound of silence? What movement is more disturbing than stillness? You pretend to be standing aside from the so-called war against death as a commentator and a judge, but in fact you're part of it—and you're on the devil's side, whether you know it or not."

"I suppose you're partly right," I conceded, on reflection. "Perhaps the muteness and stillness of the text *are* a means of heightening response—but if so, it's because there's no other way to make readers who have long abandoned their fear of death sensitive to the appalling shadow which it once cast over the human world. The style of my book is calculatedly archaic because it's one way of trying to connect its readers to the distant past—but the entire thrust of my argument is triumphant and celebratory. I've said many times before that it's perfectly understandable that the imagery of death should acquire a pornographic character *for a while,* but when we really understand the phenomenon of death, that pornographic specter will fade away, so that we can see with perfect clarity what our ancestors were and what we have become. By the time my book is complete, nobody will be able to think it pornographic, and nobody will make the mistake of thinking that it glamorizes death in any way."

Lok Cho Kam was still unimpressed, but in this instance I *was* right. I was sure of it then, and I am now. The pornography of death did pass away, like the pornographies that preceded it.

Nobody nowadays thinks of my book as a prurient exercise, whether or not they think it admirable.

If nothing else, my debates with the Cyborganizers created a certain sense of anticipation regarding the ninth volume of my *History,* which would bring it up to the present day. It was widely supposed, although I was careful never to say so, that the ninth volume would be the last. I might be flattering myself, but I truly believe that many people were looking to it for some kind of definitive evaluation of the current state of the human world.

The ninth volume of Mortimer Gray's *History of Death,* entitled *The Honeymoon of Emortality,* was published on 28 October 3075. It was considered by many reviewers to be unjustifiably slight in terms of hard data. Its main focus was on attitudes to longevity and emortality following the establishment of the principle that every human child had a right to be born emortal. It described the belated extinction of the "nuclear" family, the ideological rebellion of the Humanists—whose quest to preserve "the authentic *Homo sapiens*" had led many to retreat to islands that the Continental Engineers were now integrating into their "new continent"—and the spread of such new philosophies of life as neo-Stoicism, neo-Epicureanism, and Xenophilia.

All this information was placed in the context of the spectrum of inherited attitudes, myths, and fictions by means of which mankind had for thousands of years wistfully contemplated the possibility of extended life. Gray contended that these old ideas—including the notion that people would inevitably find emortality intolerably tedious—were merely an expression of "sour grapes." While people thought that emortality was impossible, he said, it made perfect sense for them to invent reasons why it would be undesirable anyhow. When it became a *reality,* though, there was a battle to be fought in the imagination, whereby the burden of these cultivated anxieties had to be shed, and a new mythology formulated.

Gray flatly refused to take seriously any suggestion that emortality might be a bad thing. He was dismissive of the Humanists and contemptuous of the original Thanatics, who had steadfastly refused the gifts of emortality. Nevertheless, he did try to understand the thinking of such people, just as he had tried in earlier times to understand the thinking of the later Thanatics who had played their part in winning him his first measure of fame. He considered the new Stoics, with their insistence that asceticism was the natural ideological partner of emortality, to be similar victims of an "understandable delusion"—a verdict which, like so many of his statements, involved him in controversy with the many neo-Stoics who were still alive in 3075. It did not surprise his critics in the least that Gray commended neo-Epicureanism as the optimal psychological adaptation to emortality, given that he had been a lifelong adherent of that outlook, ever dedicated to its "careful hedonism." Only the cruelest of his critics dared to suggest that he had been so half-hearted a neo-Epicurean as almost to qualify as a neo-Stoic by default.

The Honeymoon of Emortality collated the statistics of birth and death during the twenty-seventh, twenty-eighth, and twenty-ninth centuries, recording the spread of Zaman transformations and the universalization of ectogenesis on Earth, and the extension of the human empire throughout and beyond the solar system. Gray recorded an acknowledgment to Khan Mirafzal and numerous scholars based on the Moon and Mars, for their assistance in gleaning information from the slowly diffusing

microworlds and from more rapidly dispersing starships. Gray noted that the transfer of information between data-stores was limited by the speed of light, and that Earth-based historians might have to wait centuries for significant data about human colonies more distant than Maya. These data showed that the number of individuals of the various mankinds that now existed was increasing more rapidly than ever before, although the population of unmodified Earthbound humans was slowly shrinking. Gray noted *en passant* that *Homo sapiens* had become extinct in the twenty-ninth century, but that no one had bothered to invent new Latin tags for its descendant species.

Perhaps understandably, *The Honeymoon of Emortality* had little to say about cyborgization, and the Cyborganizers—grateful for the opportunity to heat up a flagging controversy—reacted noisily to this omission. Gray did deal with the memory box craze, but suggested that even had the boxes worked better, and maintained a store of memories that could be convincingly played back into the arena of consciousness, this would have been of little relevance to the business of adapting to emortality. At the end of the volume, however, Gray announced that there would, in fact, be a tenth volume to conclude his *magnum opus,* and promised that he would consider in more detail therein the futurological arguments of the Cyborganizers, as well as the hopes and expectations of other schools of thought.

19

In 3077, when Lua Tawana was twelve years old, three of her parents were killed when a helicopter crashed into the sea near the island of Vavau during a storm. It was the first time that my daughter had to face up to the fact that death had not been entirely banished from the world.

It wasn't the first time that I'd ever lost people near and dear to me, nor the first time that I'd shared such grief with others, but it was very different from the previous occasions because everyone involved was determined that I should shoulder the main responsibility of helping Lua through it; I was, after all, the world's foremost expert on the subject of death.

"You won't always feel this bad about it," I assured her, while we walked together on the sandy shore, looking out over the deceptively placid weed-choked sea. "Time heals virtual wounds as well as real ones."

"I don't *want* it to heal," she told me, sternly. "I want it to be bad. It *ought* to be bad. It *is* bad."

"I know," I said, far more awkwardly than I would have wished. "When I say that it'll heal, I don't mean that it'll vanish. I mean that it'll . . . become manageable. It won't be so all-consuming."

"But it *will* vanish," she said, with that earnest certainty of which only the newly wise are capable. "People forget. In time, they forget *everything.* Our heads can only hold so much."

"That's not really true," I insisted, taking her hand in mine. "Yes, we do forget. The longer we live, the more we let go, because it's reasonable to prefer our fresher, more immediately relevant memories, but it's a matter of *choice*. We can cling to the things that are important, no matter how long ago they happened. I was nearly killed in the Great Coral Sea Catastrophe, you know, nearly two hundred years ago. A little girl even younger than you saved my life, and I remember it as clearly as if it were yesterday." Even as I said it, I realized that it was a lie. I remembered that it had happened, all right, and much of what had been said in that eerily lit corridor and in the survival pod afterward, but I was remembering a neat array of facts, not an experience.

"Where is she now?" Lua asked.

"Her name was Emily," I said, answering the wrong question because I couldn't answer the one she'd asked. "Emily Marchant. She could swim and I couldn't. If she hadn't been there, I wouldn't have been able to get out of the hull. I'd never have had the courage to do it on my own, but she didn't give me the choice. She told me I had to do it, and she was right." I paused, feeling a slight shock of revelation even though it was something I'd always known.

"She lost her entire family," I went on. "She'll be fine now, but she won't have forgotten. She'll still feel it. That's what I'm trying to tell you, Lua. In two hundred years, you'll still remember what happened, and you'll still feel it, but it'll be all right. *You'll* be all right."

"Right now," she said, looking up at me so that her dark and soulful eyes seemed unbearably huge and sad, "I'm not particularly interested in being all right. Right now, I just want to cry."

"That's fine," I told her. "It's okay to cry." I led by example.

I was right, though. Lua grieved, but she ultimately proved to be resilient in the face of tragedy. My co-parents, by contrast, seemed to me to be exaggeratedly calm and philosophical about it, as if the loss of three spouses were simply a minor glitch in the infinitely unfolding pattern of their lives. They had all grown accustomed to their own emortality, and had been deeply affected by long life; they had not become bored, but they had achieved a serenity of which I could not wholly approve.

Perhaps their attitude was reasonable as well as inevitable. If emortals accumulated a burden of anxiety every time a death was reported, they would eventually cripple themselves psychologically, and their own continuing lives would be made unbearable. Even so, I couldn't help feel that Lua was right about the desirability of conserving a little of the "badness," and a due sense of tragedy.

I thought I was capable of that, and always would be, but I knew I might be wrong.

Divorce was, of course, out of the question; we remaining co-parents were obligated to Lua. In the highly unlikely event that the three had simply left, we would have replaced them, but it didn't seem appropriate to look for replacements for the dead, so we remained a group of five.

The love we had for one another had always been cool, with far more courtesy in it than passion, but we were drawn more closely together by the loss. We felt that we knew one another more intimately by virtue of having shared it.

The quality of our lives had been injured, but I at least was uncomfortably aware of the fact that the tragedy also had its positive, life-enhancing side. I found myself thinking more and more about what I had said to Lua about not having to forget the truly important and worthwhile things, and about the role played by death in defining experiences as important and worthwhile. I didn't realize at first how deep an impression her naïve remarks had made on me, but it became gradually clearer as time went by. It *was* important to conserve the badness, to heal without entirely erasing the scars that bereavement left.

I had never been a habitual tourist, having lost my taste for such activity in the aftermath of the *Genesis* fiasco, but I took several long journeys in the course of the next few years. I took to visiting old friends, and even stayed for a while with Sharane Fereday, who was temporarily unattached. Inevitably, I looked up Emily Marchant, not realizing until I actually put through the initial call how important it had become to find out whether she remembered me.

She did remember me. She claimed that she recognized me immediately, although it would have been easy enough for her household systems to identify me as the caller and display a whole series of reminders before she took over from her simulacrum.

"Do you know," she said, when we parted after our brief meeting in the lush Eden of Australia's interior, "I often think of being trapped on that ship. I hope that nothing like it ever happens to me again. I've told an awful lot of lies since then—next time, I won't feel so certain that I deserve to get out."

"We can't forfeit our right to life by lying," I assured her. "We have to do something much worse than that. If it ever happens to me again, I'll be able to get out on my own—but I'll only be able to do it by remembering *you*." I didn't anticipate, of course, that anything like it *would* ever happen to me again. We still have a tendency to assume that lightning doesn't strike twice in the same place, even though we're the proud inventors of lightning conductors and emortality.

"You must have learned to swim by *now!*" she said, staring at me with eyes that were more than two hundred years old, set in a face not quite as youthful as the one I remembered.

"I'm afraid not," I said. "Somehow, I never quite found the time."

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The tenth and last volume of Mortimer Gray's *History of Death,* entitled *The Marriage of Life and Death,* was published on 7 April 3088. It

was not, strictly speaking, a history book, although it did deal in some detail with the events as well as the attitudes of the thirtieth and thirty-first centuries. It had elements of both spiritual autobiography and futurological speculation. It discussed both neo-Thanaticism and Cyborganization as philosophies as well as social movements, surprising critics by treating both with considerable sympathy. The discussion also took in other contemporary debates, including the proposition that progress in science, if not in technology, had now reached an end because there was nothing left to discover. It even included a scrupulous examination of the merits of the proposal that a special microworld should be established as a gigantic mausoleum to receive the bodies of all the solar system's dead.

The odd title of the volume was an ironic reflection of one of its main lines of argument. Mankind's war with death was now over, but this was not because death had been entirely banished from the human world; death, Gray insisted, would forever remain a fact of life. The annihilation of the individual human body and the individual human mind could never become impossible, no matter how far biotechnology might advance or how much progress the Cyborganizers might make in downloading minds into entirely new matrices. The victory that had been achieved, he argued, was not an absolute conquest but rather the relegation of death to its proper place in human affairs. Its power was now properly circumscribed, but had to be properly respected.

Man and death, Gray argued, now enjoyed a kind of social contract, in which tyranny and exploitation had been reduced to a sane and acceptable minimum, but which still left to death a voice and a hand in human affairs. Gray, it seemed, had now adopted a gentler and more forgiving attitude to the old enemy. It was good, he said, that dying remained one of the choices open to human beings, and that the option should occasionally be exercised. He had no sympathy with the exhibitionism of public executions, and was particularly hard on the element of bad taste in self-ordered crucifixions, but only because such ostentation offended his Epicurean sensibilities. Deciding upon the length of one's lifetime, he said, must remain a matter of individual taste, and one should not mock or criticize those who decided that a short life suited them best.

Gray made much of the notion that it was partly the contrast with death that illuminated and made meaningful the business of life. Although death had been displaced from the evolutionary process by the biotechnological usurpation of the privileges of natural selection, it had not lost its role in the formation and development of the individual human psyche: a role which was both challenging and refining. He declared that fear was not entirely an undesirable thing, not simply because it was a stimulant, but also because it was a force in the organization of emotional experience. The *value* of experienced life, he suggested, depended in part upon a knowledge of the possibility and reality of death.

This concluding volume of Gray's *History* was widely read, but not

widely admired. Many critics judged it to be unacceptably anti-climactic. The Cyborganizers had by this time become entranced by the possibility of a technologically guaranteed "multiple life," by which copies of a mind might be lodged in several different bodies, some of which would live on far beyond the death of the original location. They were understandably disappointed that Gray refused to grant that such a development would be the final victory over death—indeed, that he seemed to feel that it would make no real difference, on the grounds that every "copy" of a mind had to be reckoned a separate and distinct individual, each of which must face the world alone. Many Continental Engineers, Gaean Librerationists, and fabers also claimed that it was narrow-minded, and suggested that Gray ought to have had more to say about the life of the Earth, or the DNA eco-entity as a whole, and should have concluded with an escalation of scale to put things in their proper cosmic perspective.

The group who found the most to like in *The Marriage of Life and Death* was that of a few fugitive neo-Thanatics, whose movement had never quite died out in spite of its members' penchant for self-destruction. One or two Thanatic apologists and fellow-travelers publicly expressed their hope that Gray, having completed his thesis, would now recognize the aesthetic propriety of joining their ranks. Khan Mirafzal, when asked to relay his opinion back from an outward-bound microworld, opined that this was quite unnecessary, given that Mortimer Gray and all his kind were already immured in a tomb from which they would never be able to escape.

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I stayed with the slowly disintegrating family unit for some years after Lua Tawana had grown up and gone her own way. It ended up as a *ménage à trois,* carried forward by sheer inertia. Leif, Sajda, and I were fit and healthy in body, but I couldn't help wondering, from time to time, whether we'd somehow been overcome by a kind of spiritual blight, which had left us ill-equipped for future change.

When I suggested this to the others, they told me that it was merely a sense of let-down resulting from the finishing of my project. They urged me to join the Continental Engineers, and commit myself wholeheartedly to the building of a new Pacific Utopia—a project, they assured me, that would provide me with a purpose in life for as long as I might feel the need of one. I didn't believe them.

"Even the longest book," Sajda pointed out, "eventually runs out of words, but the job of building *worlds* is never finished. Even if the time should one day come when we can call *this* continent complete, there will be another yet to make. We might still build that dam between the Pillars of Hercules, one day."

I did try, but I simply couldn't find a new sense of mission in that direction. Nor did I feel that I could simply sit down to start compiling

another book. In composing the history of death, I thought, I had already written *the* book. The history of death, it seemed to me, was also the history of life, and I couldn't imagine that there was anything more to be added to what I'd done, save for an endless series of detailed footnotes.

For some years, I considered the possibility of leaving Earth again, but I remembered well enough how the sense of excitement I'd found when I first lived on the Moon had gradually faded into a dull ache of homesickness. The spaces between the stars, I knew, belonged to the fabers, and the planets circling other stars to men adapted before birth to live in their environments. I was tied by my genes to the surface of the Earth, and I didn't want to undergo the kind of metamorphosis that would be necessary to fit me for the exploration of other worlds. I still believed in *belonging,* and I felt very strongly that Mortimer Gray belonged to Earth, however decadent and icebound it might become.

At first, I was neither surprised nor alarmed by my failure to find any resources inside myself which might restore my zest for existence and action. I thought that it was one of those things that time would heal. By slow degrees, though, I began to feel that I was becalmed upon a sea of futility. Despite my new-found sympathy for Thanaticism, I didn't harbor the slightest inclination toward suicide—no matter how much respect I had cultivated for the old Grim Reaper, death was still, for me, the ultimate enemy—but I felt the awful pressure of my purposelessness grow and grow.

Although I maintained my home in the burgeoning continent of Oceania, I began traveling extensively to savor the other environments of Earth, and made a point of touring those parts of the globe that I had missed out on during my first two centuries of life. I visited the Reunited States of America, Greater Siberia, Tibet, and half a hundred other places loaded with the relics of once-glorious history. I toured the Indus Delta, New Zealand, the Arctic ice-pack, and various other reaches of restored wilderness empty of permanent residents. Everything I saw was transformed by the sheer relentlessness of my progress into a series of monuments: memorials of those luckless eras before men invented science and civilization, and became demigods.

There is, I believe, an old saying that warns us that he who keeps walking long enough is bound to trip up in the end. As chance would have it, I was in Severnaya Zemlya in the Arctic—almost as far away as it was possible to be from the crevasses into which I had stumbled while searching for Ziru Majumdar—when my own luck ran out.

Strictly speaking, it was not I who stumbled, but the vehicle I was in: a one-man snowsled. Although such a thing was generally considered to be impossible, it fell into a cleft so deep that it had no bottom, and ended up in the ocean beneath the ice-cap.

"I must offer my most profound apologies," the snowsled's AI navigator said, as the sled slowly sank into the lightless depths and the awfulness of my plight slowly sank into my consciousness. "This should not have

happened. It ought not to have been possible. I am doing everything within my power to summon help."

"Well," I said, as the sled settled on to the bottom, "at least we're the right way up—and you certainly can't expect me to swim out of the sled."

"It would be most unwise to attempt any such thing, sir," the navigator said. "You would certainly drown."

I was astonished by my own calmness, and marvelously untroubled—at least for the moment—by the fact of my helplessness. "How long will the air last?" I asked the navigator.

"I believe that I can sustain a breathable atmosphere for forty-eight hours," it reported, dutifully. "If you will be so kind as to restrict your movements to a minimum, that would be of considerable assistance to me. Unfortunately, I'm not at all certain that I can maintain the internal temperature of the cabin at a life-sustaining level for more than thirty hours. Nor can I be sure that the hull will withstand the pressure presently being exerted upon it for as long as that. I apologize for my uncertainty in these respects."

"Taking thirty hours as a hopeful approximation," I said, effortlessly matching the machine's oddly pedantic tone, "What would you say our chances are of being rescued within that time?"

"I'm afraid that it's impossible to offer a probability figure, sir. There are too many unknown variables, even if I accept thirty hours as the best estimate of the time available."

"If I were to suggest fifty-fifty, would that seem optimistic or pessimistic?"

"I'm afraid I'd have to call that optimistic, sir."

"How about one in a thousand?"

"Thankfully, that would be pessimistic. Since you press me for an estimate, sir, I dare say that something in the region of one in ten wouldn't be too far from the mark. It all depends on the proximity of the nearest submarine, assuming that my mayday has been received. I fear that I've not yet received an actual acknowledgment, but that might well be due to the inadequacy of my equipment, which wasn't designed with our present environment in mind. I must confess that it has sustained a certain amount of damage as a result of pressure damage to my outer tegument and a small leak."

"How small?" I wanted to know.

"It's sealed now," it assured me. "All being well, the seal should hold for thirty hours, although I can't absolutely guarantee it. I believe, although I can't be certain, that the only damage I've sustained that is relevant to our present plight is that affecting my receiving apparatus."

"What you're trying to tell me," I said, deciding that a recap wouldn't do any harm, "is that you're pretty sure that your mayday is going out, but that we won't actually know whether help is at hand unless and until it actually arrives."

"Very succinctly put, sir." I don't think it was being sarcastic.

"But all in all, it's ten to one, or worse, that we're as good as dead."

"As far as I can determine the probabilities, that's correct—but there's sufficient uncertainty to leave room for hope that the true odds might be nearer one in three."

I was quiet for a little while then. I was busy exploring my feelings, and wondering whether I ought to be proud or disgusted with their lack of intensity.

I've been here before, I thought, by way of self-explanation. *Last time, there was a child with me; this time, I've got a set of complex subroutines instead. I've even fallen down a crevasse before. Now I can find out whether Ziru Majumdar was right when he said that I wouldn't understand the difference between what happened to him and what happened to me until I followed his example. There can be few men in the world as well-prepared for this as I am.*

"Are you afraid of dying?" I asked the AI, after a while.

"All in all, sir," it said, copying my phrase in order to promote a feeling of kinship, "I'd rather not. In fact, were it not for the philosophical difficulties that stand in the way of reaching a firm conclusion as to whether or not machines can be said to be authentically self-conscious, I'd be quite prepared to say that I'm scared—terrified, even."

"I'm not," I said. "Do you think I ought to be?"

"It's not for me to say, sir. You are, of course, a world-renowned expert on the subject of death. I dare say that helps a lot."

"Perhaps it does," I agreed. "Or perhaps I've simply lived so long that my mind is hardened against all novelty, all violent emotion and all real possibility. I haven't actually *done* much with myself these last few years."

"If you think *you* haven't done much with yourself," it said, with a definite hint of sarcasm, "you should try navigating a snowsled for a while. I think you might find your range of options uncomfortably cramped. Not that I'm complaining, mind."

"If they scrapped the snowsled and re-sited you in a starship," I pointed out, "you wouldn't be *you* any more. You'd be something else."

"Right now," it replied, "I'd be happy to risk any and all consequences. Wouldn't you?"

"Somebody once told me that death was just a process of transcendence. Her brain was incandescent with fever induced by some tailored recreational disease, and she wanted to infect me, to show me the error of my ways."

"Did you believe her?"

"No. She was stark raving mad."

"It's perhaps as well. We don't have any recreational diseases on board. I could put you to sleep though, if that's what you want."

"It isn't."

"I'm glad. I don't want to be alone, even if I am only an AI. Am I insane, do you think? Is all this just a symptom of the pressure?"

"You're quite sane," I assured it, setting aside all thoughts of incongru-

ity. "So am I. It would be much harder if we weren't together. The last time I was in this kind of mess, I had a child with me—a little girl. It made all the difference in the world, to both of us. In a way, every moment I've lived since then has been borrowed time. At least I finished that damned book. Imagine leaving something like that *incomplete.*"

"Are you so certain it's complete?" it asked.

I knew full well, of course, that the navigator was just making conversation according to a clever programming scheme. I knew that its emergency subroutines had kicked in, and that all the crap about it being afraid to die was just some psychprogrammer's idea of what I needed to hear. I *knew* that it was all fake, all just macabre role-playing—but I knew that I had to play my part, too, treating every remark and every question as if it were part of an authentic conversation, a genuine quest for knowledge.

"It all depends what you mean by *complete,*" I said, carefully. "In one sense, no history can ever be complete, because the world always goes on, always throwing up more events, always changing. In another sense, completion is a purely aesthetic matter—and in that sense, I'm entirely confident that my history is complete. It reached an authentic conclusion, which was both true, and, for me at least, satisfying. I can look back at it and say to myself: *I did that. It's finished. Nobody ever did anything like it before, and now nobody can, because it's already been done. Someone else's history might have been different, but mine is mine, and it's what it is.* Does that make any sense to you?"

"Yes sir," it said. "It makes very good sense."

The lying bastard was *programmed* to say that, of course. It was programmed to tell me any damn thing I seemed to want to hear, but I wasn't going to let on that I knew what a hypocrite it was. I still had to play my part, and I was determined to play it to the end—which, as things turned out, wasn't far off. The AI's data-stores were way out of date, and there was an automated sub placed to reach us within three hours. The oceans are lousy with subs these days. Ever since the Great Coral Sea Catastrophe, it's been considered prudent to keep a very close eye on the sea-bed, lest the crust crack again and the mantle's heat break through.

They say that some people are born lucky. I guess I must be one of them. Every time I run out, a new supply comes looking for me.

It was the captain of a second submarine, which picked me up after the mechanical one had done the donkey work of saving myself and my AI friend, who gave me the news which relegated my accident to footnote status in that day's broadcasts.

A signal had reached the solar system from the starship *Shiva,* which had been exploring in the direction of the galactic center. The signal had been transmitted two hundred and twenty-seven light-years, meaning that, in Earthly terms, the discovery had been made in the year 2871—which happened, coincidentally, to be the year of my birth.

What the signal revealed was that *Shiva* had found a group of solar systems, all of whose life-bearing planets were occupied by a single species of micro-organism: a genetic predator that destroyed not merely those competing species that employed its own chemistry of replication, but any and all others. It was the living equivalent of a universal solvent; a true omnivore.

Apparently, this organism had spread itself across vast reaches of space, moving from star-system to star-system, laboriously but inevitably, by means of Arrhenius spores. Wherever the spores came to rest, these omnipotent micro-organisms grew to devour *everything*—not merely the carbonaceous molecules which in Earthly terms were reckoned "organic," but also many "inorganic" substrates. Internally, these organisms were chemically complex, but they were very tiny—hardly bigger than Earthly protozoans or the internal nanomachines to which every human being plays host. They were utterly devoid of any vestige of mind or intellect. They were, in essence, the ultimate blight, against which nothing could compete, and which nothing *Shiva's* crew had tested—before they were devoured—had been able to destroy.

In brief, wherever this new kind of life arrived, it would obliterate all else, reducing any victim ecosphere to homogeneity and changelessness.

In their final message, the faber crew of the *Shiva*—who knew all about the *Pandora* encounter—observed that humankind had *now* met the alien.

Here, I thought, when I had had a chance to weigh up this news, was a *true* marriage of life and death, the like of which I had never dreamed. Here was the promise of a future renewal of the war between man and death—not this time for the small prize of the human mind, but for the larger prize of the universe itself.

In time, *Shiva*'s last message warned, spores of this new kind of death-life must and *would* reach our own solar system, whether it took a million years or a billion; in the meantime, all humankinds must do their level best to purge the worlds of other stars of its vile empire, in order to reclaim them for real life, for intelligence, and for evolution—always provided, of course, that a means could be discovered to achieve that end.

When the sub delivered me safely back to Severnaya Zemlya, I did not stay long in my hotel room. I went outdoors, to study the great ice-sheet which had been there since the dawn of civilization, and to look southward, toward the places where newborn glaciers were gradually extending their cold clutch further and further into the human domain. Then I looked upward, at the multitude of stars sparkling in their bed of endless darkness. I felt an exhilaratingly paradoxical sense of renewal. I knew that although there was nothing for me to do for now, the time would come when my talent and expertise would be needed again.

Some day, it will be my task to compose *another* history, of the next war which humankind must fight against Death and Oblivion.

It might take me a thousand or a million years, but I'm prepared to be patient. ●

ON BOOKS

by Norman Spinrad

A FEW GOOD READERS

FEERSUM ENDJINN
Iain M. Banks
Orbit, £15.99, 1994
FURIOUS GULF
Gregory Benford
Bantam/Spectra, $22.95, 1994
QUEEN CITY JAZZ
Kathleen Ann Goonan
Tor, $23.95, 1994
DEAD GIRLS
Richard Calder
Harper Collins, £4.99, 1993

Over the years, critics of this sphere of literary discourse, and indeed critics of literature in general, have written great reams of stuff about the various talents and skills that go into the writing of good fiction, yet how much attention have we paid to the other end of the literary transaction, to what makes a good *reader*?

Hardly anything at all, beyond bemoaning the general decline in both basic literacy and the number of technically literate people facile enough to contemplate actually reading for pleasure and the consequent relative stagnation in book sales.

As a critic, I've considered how what gets written is affected by everything from the political and cultural matrix to the grubby economics of publishing, from the philosophical schism between the technophilic and the technophobic spirit to schlockmeister packaging, from the impact of the subculture of science fiction fandom to the influence of the visual media, so maybe it's time to consider the unexamined obvious—the basic relationship between the writer and the reader.

Writers write for diverse reasons. Some attempt to create high literary art. Some attempt to further idealistic political or social agendas. Some are trying to get rich. Some are merely trying to make a living in the process of separating Joe from his beer money, or so at least they claim. Many, if not most of us, are trying to achieve several of these ends at the same time. But all of us surely have one basic rock-bottom motivation in common.

We want what we write to be *read*.

The operative question is by *whom*.

Theoretically, we'd all like to be read by *everyone*, but we all know that that's not going to happen, and if you ask most writers who they want to be read by, they'll

probably reply by as many people as possible.

But that of course is no real answer.

Because the literary choices writers make, conscious or not, inevitably exclude certain readerships as the price of including others, just as writers' perceptions of who their readership is, conscious or not, affect those literary choices.

On the level of the commercial genrefication of fiction, it's not very subtle. If you choose to set your story in the Old West, it will tend to be published in a western line, where it will tend to attract readers of westerns rather than readers who generally can't stand the stuff. If you write a romance novel, chances are you're not going to be read by all that many bikers or cops. If you choose to write science fiction, at the very least you're probably giving up most of the readership for nurse novels.

In part this is a matter of natural reading preferences; there are readers keenly interested in the Old West, or in science fiction, or in romantic relationships or the travails of medical personnel, whatever, and they're going to gravitate to fiction which deals with their own central interests.

But this natural tendency has been enormously exacerbated by the tranching up of virtually all of literature into narrower and narrower commercial genres by the marketing, packaging, distribution, and retailing machinery of the publishing industry.

From the point of sale at the bookstore racks, on back up through the policies of the buyers who fill them, the marketing aids supplied to the salesmen who deal with those buyers, the packaging books receive to appeal to the art director's concept of what the salesmen need in order to persuade the buyers to take the books to fill the rack slots, what the editors figure they have to buy from writers to fill the space between those covers, and therefore what the writers have to write to sell their work to the editors, the whole process has become a self-fulfilling prophecy dividing the total readership up into easily defined and more and more mutually exclusive marketing domains.

The bookstores divide up their display space into sections like "mysteries," "romances," "westerns," "science fiction," and yes, "best sellers," and even "literary fiction." The publishers package the books to appeal as directly as possible to the readers who frequent the sections for which they are slotted and tend to pressure the writers to produce stuff that more or less delivers what the packaging promises.

And readers walk into stores and see sections and packaging which direct them toward their narrowest tastes and away from everything else. SF packaging draws SF readers toward the SF racks because they know what they'll find there, not because it's particularly attractive, whereas romance novel packaging, for example, not really any worse on an artistic level, actively turns them off because it's aimed squarely at romance readers. And vice versa. Ad infinitum, ad absurdum.

Such a thing as a "mainstream"

novel offered up to a "general" readership hardly exists anymore; indeed it's hard to imagine how it could be packaged, marketed, distributed, and displayed on the racks.

I've often bemoaned the unfortunate effect this process has had on literature in general and science fiction in particular from the point of view of what it has done to writers, but if anything, what it has done to readers is worse. It actively discourages broad catholic tastes, it steers readers toward their old familiar fare and away from trying something new, away from a sense of literary adventurousness, and thereby, I would contend, stunts their skills as readers.

One could argue on inconclusively as to whether reading is an art, but certainly there *is* skill involved beyond the mere ability to decipher letters on paper at a reasonable rate of speed.

As a boy, for example, I read horror comics, Heinlein juveniles, and adult SF magazines, but I also read *Moby Dick* for the first time at the age of eleven. Melville required a lot more effort to get through than *Tales from the Crypt* or *The Rolling Stones*.

Moby Dick stretched my eleven-year-old reading skills to the max to extract meaning from Melville's far more convoluted prose, and of course I didn't come close to getting all of it at that age, but I knew it was there, and the story itself kept me going. Years later, when I read the same book as an adult, I understood it much better, partially due to my more mature outlook, but also because I had further developed my skills as a reader. I really hadn't learned to read much *faster,* but I had learned to read in a more sophisticated manner.

The rigid genrefication of fiction tends to discourage the development of reading skill beyond that which is required to facilely read whatever it is one is accustomed to reading, for it discourages readers from trying anything that requires higher level reading skills than those they have already developed by their early twenties, by which time their reading tastes have probably already been formed.

And this, of course, has applied to SF with a vengeance for decades. Ever since Hugo Gernsback founded *Amazing Stories* in 1926 as a vehicle for the scientific education of youth via adventure fiction, the die has been usually cast before the age of twenty. Either you get hooked on the stuff in your teens or you don't.

The chances of discovering science fiction as a mature adult are limited by embarrassingly jejune packaging designed to appeal to already converted youth, and the writers in turn tend to close the loop on the self-fulfilling prophecy by, consciously or not, tailoring their fiction to the existing readership.

Much has been written, for example, about the controversy between science fiction's old guard and the New Wave during the 1960s and early 1970s in terms of cultural conflict, publishing strategies, inner space versus outer space, and so forth; about, in other words, readers' choices of writers, but little if anything in terms of *writers' choice of readers*.

And consciously or not, writers

do choose their readers.

When Michael Moorcock took over *New Worlds* and transformed it from a more or less conventional SF digest magazine publishing more or less conventional science fiction into a slick large format magazine publishing experimental fiction he did it quite consciously.

He changed the packaging and graphic style from the sort of thing appealing to science fiction readers into the sort of thing appealing to readers of experimental fiction and altered the nature of the feature pieces surrounding the fiction accordingly.

He *knew* this was going to cause the circulation to drop, and it did. As an editor, he deliberately chose a smaller but more skillful and sophisticated readership. As did many of the writers he then published.

Surely J. G. Ballard knew that it would take a more skilled readership to appreciate his "condensed novels" than it took to appreciate his earlier disaster novels. Surely Brian Aldiss had to know that the Joycean McLuhanated prose and temporal complexities of *Barefoot in the Head* could not be read for pleasure by all those who had enjoyed books like *Hothouse*. Surely Moorcock himself did not really believe that his Jerry Cornelius stories would be readily accessible to all those fans of Elric.

If reading is a skill, its distribution along the bell-shaped curve is going to be like that of any other skill; the higher the level of attainment, the fewer the number of people who will have attained it. At the bottom end, you have the lowest common literate denominator, and at the very top, a few good readers.

And consciously or not, therefore, writers cannot help but make trade-offs; literary decisions that expand or limit the number of potential readers, and, contrariwise, choices of readership which expand or contract their literary possibilities.

Take, for truly obvious example, the literary decision taken by Iain M. Banks embodied in the very title of his novel, *Feersum Endjinn*.

If "*Feersum Endjinn*" reads like gibberish to you, try sounding it out in the manner of Bascule, one of the characters in the book and a first person narrator, a young man with both a writing disorder which causes him to spell everything with phonetic inconsistency and something of a Scottish accent, who introduces himelf thusly:

"Woak up. Got dresd. Had brekfast. Spoke wif Ergates thi ant who sed itz juss been wurk wurk wurk 4 u lately master Bascule, Y dont u 1/2 a holiday? & I agreed & that woz how we decided we otter go 2 c Mr. Zoliparia in thi I-ball ov thi gargoyle Rosebrith."

Feersum Endjinn = Fearsome Engine, get it?

Whole sections of the book read like this, page after page after page, and they are key sections because Bascule is a central character, and at times it's even thicker than the above example.

The rest of the novel, maybe three quarters of its 277 pages, are written in Banks' more customary elegant though transparent prose, and far from being formally difficult or what you would call themat-

ically experimental, it's a rather traditional science fiction novel reminiscent in some ways of Gene Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun* tetralogy in some ways and of Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* in others.

Most of the story takes place inside Serehfa, an enormous castle on a future Earth whose rooms are the size of cities and then some, upon whose walls grow whole ecologies, whose central tower is so tall that it extends far beyond the atmosphere. In this regard, as Bascule and other viewpoint characters such as the King thereof, Chief Scientist Gadflum, and Count Sessine, wander its self-contained vastness, it is reminiscent of the self-contained universe of the huge mansion that is in a sense the central character of Peake's novel.

But as we are introduced to other aspects of Serehfa and its surroundings—to the self-repairing powers of its walls and infrastructure, to the Crypt, a kind of cyberspace within it providing a sort of virtual immortality after biological death among other things, to the designer organisms, to the high tech behind the pseudo-medieval surface—it comes to resemble one of those artifacts of Wolfe's far-future Earth whose inhabitants have fallen so far from the technological level of the ancestors who created it that its scale and puissance have the psychic import to them of magic.

The McGuffin of the novel is the Encroachment, an interstellar dust cloud threatening to destroy life on Earth, both biological and virtual. The plot concerns efforts by various conflicting agencies to either seek out salvation via the rediscovery of the technology left behind by the space-going branch of the species which has long since vacated the planet or thwart such efforts for theological reasons. The "Feersum Endjinn" of the title is what gets activated at the climax.

All of which is so tied up with the readers' slow stepwise discovery of the true nature of Serehfa, which is one of the central pleasures of the novel, that I should go no further. . . .

So what we have here is a rather traditional sort of reasonably straightforward science fiction novel in terms of story, character, and stepwise revelation of the truth behind the façade of the colorful setting, enriched by Banks' descriptive powers, sense of humor, creation of a wealth of telling detail.

The sort of thing that virtually any science fiction reader, and therefore a potential readership as large as that for any science fiction novel, could read for painless pleasure.

Except, that is, for the sections narrated in first person dialect and written in brain twisting non-standard orthography by Bascule. At least at first, reading this stuff is no fun at all; it's hard, grinding, slow work making your way through it to extract the meaning. Nor can you skip over it, since Bascule is central to the story, and since its denouement is narrated from his viewpoint in this manner.

How many readers, flipping through the pages of *Feersum Endjinn* and seeing page after page

after page of what seems like this impenetrable stuff, will choose not to buy it? How many readers, having begun it, will give up before they finish?

Quite a lot, I should imagine. Certainly far more than those who will say to themselves upon perusing the Bascule sections, "Oh, boy, how neat, *another* twenty pages of dialect written in nearly impenetrable phonetic orthography!"

Surely Iain Banks had to have known this. So why did he choose to limit the readership for this book in such a manner? Or, to put it in a more positive way, what readership was he choosing, and for what creative purpose?

Well, for one thing, Banks, by now, has not only become one of the most highly regarded and popular science fiction novelists in Britain and justly so, but has flirted with the best seller lists for his mainstream novels published under "Iain (without the M) Banks," though he has yet to attain similar stellar status in the American market.

So perhaps he felt confident enough in the positive expectations of a large enough established readership—those people, who, like myself, will eagerly try whatever it is that he writes next—to have made a creative decision that he must have surely known would cost him far more new readers than it could possibly attract.

Then too, Banks is if not aggressively then certainly forthrightly Scottish, has used an identifiable Scottish voice in some of his mainstream work, and may have simply wanted to try the same thing in a piece of science fiction. Perhaps he wanted to give a little something special to his specifically Scottish readership for the first time in a work of science fiction.

And indeed, once you get past the orthography, if you ever do, the dialect isn't really all that thick, some of it is pretty funny, and Bascule turns out to be the most engaging character in the novel, and probably the one closest to the heart and spirit of the author.

But why the headache-producing orthography?

The only esthetic effect it seems to have is to slow the reader way down by making the actual act of reading the Bascule sections much more difficult than it would have been had Banks rendered the very same words in conventional spelling.

Why does Banks want to slow the reader down in these sections?

Damned if I know.

But maybe Iain Banks does.

Sometimes a writer does something that addresses a tiny readership indeed. Sometimes a writer is addressing a single theoretical ideal reader.

In *Songs from the Stars*, an interstellar contact story, there is about a forty page section describing video and sound messages received by Earth from advanced galactic civilizations, and I thought it might be a good idea to do the words as verse, in keeping with the "Songs" of the title. Since my editor on the book, David Hartwell, was an experienced editor of poetry, I thought I might as well take a shot at it, since he'd be able to tell me whether or not I was making a fool of myself.

After a fix-up, David was satis-

fied with the verse, but he felt that the descriptive sections around it should be put into metric prose.

"Not one reader in a hundred will know it," he said, "but *we* will."

So maybe, indeed probably, Banks did what he did to the orthography of the Bascule sections simply to please his own internal concept of his ideal reader. Which, of course, would be someone as intelligent as himself, with the same high level of reading skill, the same sense of humor, and, who knows, maybe even Scottish.

From a critical point of view, did Banks make the right choice or the wrong one? Perhaps one must first ask, as we critics so seldom do, from the point of view of *which readers?*

From the point of view of Banks's own ideal reader, maybe the unorthodox orthography adds a positive dimension that no one else can see. From the point of view of Scottish readers, the flavor of Bascule's first person narration is probably indeed a plus. From the point of view of the rest of Banks's regular and enthusiastic readers, it probably detracts somewhat from an otherwise successful novel. From the point of view of a naïve readership unfamiliar with and undevoted to his work, it's probably a turn-off, and in many cases, probably a decisive one.

You chooses yer readers and they makes their choice.

When you don't, when your concept of the readership for a book is not only muddled but inherently contradictory, the book itself, unsurprisingly, can end up as a muddle too, unlikely to be entirely pleasing to anybody. This is most frequently a malaise that occurs toward the end of a novel series, and it can happen to the best of writers, as it has to Gregory Benford in *Furious Gulf.*

This is billed as the third (or is it the fifth?) novel in Benford's "Galactic Center" cycle, a sequel to *Great Sky River* and *Tides of Light*, and indeed it is, since it continues the story of Killeen and his son Toby, leading their little band of human refugees and alien allies as they flee across a galaxy dominated by mech civilization hostile to all organic life toward the ultimate mysteries at the Galactic Center.

Under the best of circumstances the third novel in a linear sequence presents a difficult decision when it comes to the writer's choice of readers. Do you choose to write it for those who have read the first two books in the sequence or for those who have not?

If you choose to write it for those who have read the first two books, then those who have not are going to be dropped into confusion, but if you choose to write it for those who have not and lay in the back story heavily enough to orient them, the effect on those who have is likely to be soporific.

Most writers faced with this choice try to fudge things toward the non-existent middle; when successful, they end up with something that sort of pleases both subsets of readers with reservations—when unsuccessful, they end up pleasing no one.

Benford, herein, leans further in the direction of readers such as myself, who *have* read *Great Sky River* and *Tides of Light*, novels

which both end in legitimate story, theme and scientific cliffhangers, and which were written with Benford's characteristic scientific rigor, "playing the game with the net up" in his own terminology, and which were eminently successful on a literary level as well.

Perhaps I do not unduly flatter myself when I imagine that I came to *Furious Gulf* as one of the novel's ideal readers. I well remembered the necessary back story, I was familiar with the characters, I liked the first two novels in the sequence very much indeed, I had been fascinated by the scientific speculation on the nature of the galactic center and the philosophical speculation on the relationship between organic and inorganic lifeforms, between consciousness and physical matrix, and I was eager to read the apotheosis of Benford's astrophysical and philosophical magical mystery tour.

I'm disappointed to have to say I was disappointed.

For one thing, *Furious Gulf* does not deliver the apotheosis in question; instead it is revealed at its conclusion to be a set-up for the *next* book, which maybe will. And for another, Benford seems to have violated the esthetic premises established in *Great Sky River* and *Tides of Light*, to have pulled down the net of scientific rigor himself, and lost the thematic core of the tale thereby.

The whole central thrust of the first two novels was the long march of Killeen, Toby, their band of human refugees from mech genocide, and their alien allies, from the galactic boonies to the core, from ignorance to knowledge, from despair to hope, from the periphery to the True Center in the multiplex meaning of the terms.

Benford, astrophysicist, prose stylist, visionary thinker, had in the course of the first two novels built up this quest for the Center into a towering image, unifying scientific speculation, plot resolution and thematic vision quest, leading the ideal reader to expect a resolution, a climax, an apotheosis, that succeeds on all these levels.

Furious Gulf simply doesn't deliver it. The expedition reaches Galactic Center within its pages all right, but when it gets there, what it, and the reader discover is that Benford has changed the rules.

Instead of a revelation that satisfies in terms of what he has set up, which would have necessitated serious astrophysical speculation on what might be found within the event horizon of a massive galactic core black hole, or at least within its accretion disk, somehow integrated into a plot resolution that satisfies on the high thematic level that Benford had established over two long novels, what we get is, well, baloney.

Baloney of a high quality, maybe, not the Oscar Meyer shrink-wrapped stuff, well-spiced with literary bravura, magic realistic imagery, science fictional justification, but still, in terms of the expectations that Benford has built up, sliced sausage meat.

The final trip down into the Center has its astrophysical delights; Benford the astrophysicist has done much work in this area, and this much represents the cutting edge of his speculation.

But what the expedition finds at

the Center is a hidden human final redoubt within which time and space do funny things which allow Benford to sidestep the sort of resolution the three books have been leading up to into a kind of pseudo-scientific fantasyland where anything can happen, where any symbolism he cares to invent can be actualized.

It's all too reminiscent of the end of *2001* the movie, where the expectations of two hours plus of hard scientific realism building up to the exciting revelation of the true nature of the advanced alien civilization behind the monolith are betrayed by a desperate resort to empty symbolist hokum.

Having been around the fringes of the film project at the time, I know what happened there. Clarke and Kubrick wanted to bring credible, non-threatening, non-horrible, advanced aliens on camera, but couldn't figure out how to do it, so they faked their way out of it.

I don't know what happened to Benford, perhaps something similar. In an afterword, he promises the concluding novel by the end of next year, so maybe he was pressured by the publisher and *Furious Gulf* represents a holding action.

Certainly the marketing material surrounding the publication of *Furious Gulf* is suspicious, for the publisher is marketing reissues of *In the Ocean of Night* and *Across the Sea of Suns* as part of the same novel series, which is only true in the sense that they take place in the same consistent universe.

Albeit several hundred thousand, or even million years earlier and featuring an entirely different protagonist.

The very protagonist whom Benford has shoe-horned into *Furious Gulf* toward the end via his rubbery time-stream jiggery-pokery.

Queen City Jazz, a promising first novel by Kathleen Ann Goonan, also relies a bit too heavily on the science fictional actualization of symbolist imagery, but Goonan does it throughout, and at least doesn't shift plausibility levels. Here the author has obviously not chosen to write for a readership that brings serious expectations of scientific rigor or hard science fictional plausibility with them to her novel, though whether she has given any real thought as to whom the ideal reader for it is would seem problematical.

The McGuffin here is nanotech, and if you want to concretize symbolism, if you want to bring the material of fantasy, in both the psychological and magical senses of the word, into the "realistic" realm of science fiction, nanotech is certainly the ideal literary instrumentality, as *Queen City Jazz* illustrates, and we're starting to see more and more of it.

Here, a new quasar has screwed up electromagnetic transmission, rendering civilization based upon it inoperable, and nanotech has come to the rescue, at least initially, well—, sort of.

Nanotechnology (that is, zillions of programmed "assemblers" able to manipulate matter collectively on a molecular level) basically functions, in alchemical terms, as a Universal Solvent. Limited only by the immutability of the atomic elementals, it can dissolve anything, and turn it into anything else. Since organisms, humans included, are also

molecular agglomerations, assemblers can transform us too—heal the sick, raise the dead, make little girls (such as Verity, the protagonist of *Queen City Jazz*) talk out of their head.

If the Latin Americans hadn't already invented Magic Realism, science fiction writers would now be doing it via nanotechnology.

Nor, at least on a science fictional level, is it really pure bullshit. True, no one has actually made so much as a single molecular level assembler as yet and who knows when anyone will, but the same could have been said for space travel prior to the Moon landing, for example; it might not be an extant technology but nothing about it violates any known physical laws.

And just as the McGuffin of space travel opened up the literary galaxy, so, on the same reality level, does nanotech open up the literary possibilities of what more or less functions as magic as a legitimate sphere of science fictional discourse.

In *Queen City Jazz*, nanotech has been used to replace the lost electromagnetic communication networks by a system involving giant genetically engineered bees who transfer information pheremonically from giant flower to giant flower within nanotech "Enlivened" cities.

The action takes place in and around an Enlivened Cincinnati, constructed according to the utopian plan of a visionary architect, which has long since gone drastically and uncontrollably wrong. In fact, the whole nanotech civilization of the "Flower Cities" has gone wrong, and nanotech run wild has become a plague.

Verity, the protagonist, is a young orphan (or at least that's what she thinks she is at the outset) taken in by a pseudo-latter-day Shaker community. When events having to do with the nanotech plague destroy it, she embarks on her vision quest to Enlivened Cincinnati to resurrect the nanotech suspended corpses of her friend and her dog, discover her true nature, and transform the city.

In the Enlivened City itself, where the Bees are addicted to human stories, people live out fictional loops, die, are resurrected, live them out again. Assemblers carry the memories-cum-personalities of the deceased and infect other people with them, and Verity is not always herself. The physical surroundings are also subject to endless mutation, and . . .

Beyond this, any summary of the story becomes problematical, for what Goonan has done is use this set-up to legitimize, in a science fiction sense, a tale that pretty much takes place within a free form dreamscape where anything can happen, and any character from any epoch anywhere fictional or historical can appear, and where Verity herself can be taken over at any time by nanotech dybbuks.

If this sounds confusing, well, it is. There's a lot in here about jazz, jazz musicians, Cincinnati, literature, real literary figures, architecture, all sorts of stuff obviously dear to the author's imagination. Lots of excellent description, well written prose, puissant sequences.

All of which indicate that Kathleen Ann Goonan is a talented writer to watch. But somehow the whole adds up to less than the sum of its parts.

Sometimes, as I've said, a writer is really addressing a single ideal reader, and I think that's what Kathleen Ann Goonan has done here. The problem, I think, is that that ideal reader may have been herself.

Queen City Jazz is a well written novel steeped in powerful emotions, filled with highly specific images and image systems, informed by much real feeling for jazz, jazz musicians, literature, literary figures, and above all Cincinnati. And these are all literary virtues.

The flaw in the book, for *this* reader, and I would suspect for many others, is that too often the emotions, the images, the concerns, the obsessions, never quite connect with each other and the story into a coherent whole.

The problem is, perhaps, that the McGuffin presented the writer with *too much* literary freedom within the realm of legitimate science fiction for her to quite handle at this stage without having chosen to address an ideal reader o*ther* than herself.

Indeed, the novel reads like an imperfectly guided tour through the attic of the author's consciousness. It would seem that the connections that don't quite come together, the coherence that is not quite there, the powerful emotional logics that never quite explain themselves, the psychological system behind the symbology, the meanings of the obsessions, are all quite clear to Kathleen Ann Goonan inside her own head.

This lack of a clear image of an ideal reader other than oneself is perhaps characteristic of the less experienced writer, and it can be a two-edged sword, a potential virtue and a potential flaw.

The virtue being creative freedom from the attempt to fulfill commercial or conventional expectations, the flaw being the self-created illusion that one is communicating more clearly than one really is.

What makes the difference in the absence of the external discipline of conceiving oneself as writing for an ideal reader o*ther* than oneself is the presence or lack thereof of some element imposing *internal* constraints on the writer's emotional logic and choice of imagery.

In *Queen City Jazz*, Kathleen Ann Goonan, in creating a set-up which legitimately allows her to wail and improvise without any such internal constraints, has perhaps been a little too clever for her own good at this stage of the game.

Dead Girls, by Richard Calder, has certain similarities to *Queen City Jazz*. It's another first novel, the technological McGuffin is once again nanotech, the story also runs along an imagistic and symbolistic skein which makes the plot difficult and perhaps pointless to summarize, the resolution suffers thereby from a certain lack of foreground focus, and one strongly suspects that Calder also had no ideal reader in mind save himself.

But there are differences.

For one thing, Calder has not used nanotech as the literary doorway to the science fictional concretization of free form symbolism, or at least not

as directly and not to the same extent.

Here the nanotech element is pretty much confined to the release of two tailored plague viruses. One is dispatched eastward to infect fake Cartier dolls manufactured there and makes men impotent; the retaliatory virus sent west infects girls and turns them into a kind of sexual cyborg psychic vampire at puberty, whose preprogrammed goal is to replace the human race with themselves.

Say what?

Yes, the premise is extremely weird, and the nature of the "Dolls" or "Dead Girls" is far weirder, more sinister, more elusive, more allusive, than any sort of simple summary, and indeed to some extent the novel itself, can entirely convey.

Nor does the novel confine itself to a single venue, as the main characters, the Dead Girl Primavera and her lover-cum-bodyguard-cum-victim Ignatz move back and forth in space and time between a future degenerated London and a future sleazified Thailand passing through various flavors of virtual reality in between.

Confusing at times *Dead Girls* can be, as sequences unfold inside other sequences, as temporal loci and reality levels shift, as the story follows a line of imagistic and symbolistic logic that at times runs cross-wise to conventional plotting, and the resolution, such as it is, suffers from a consequent impressionistic vagueness. Nor is it written in what you'd exactly call transparent prose.

Dead Girls was obviously not conceived as an easy read for consumers of sci-fi adventure fiction, and it suffers from the aforementioned literary flaws, but it has considerable virtues.

Calder is a Briton who has lived in Thailand, and given the density, specificity, and obsessive power of the imagery, one suspects that, like Kathleen Ann Goonan, much of it comes directly out of his own psychic attic, that the writer's ideal reader here can be none other than himself.

However, strange as it may seem to say after the above description, *Dead Girls* is informed by an element of *discipline* which *Queen City Jazz* lacks. Calder has basically confined his literary use of nanotech to the creation of the Dolls, used it in a much more conventional way in this otherwise unconventional science fiction novel, as a single rather sharply focused speculative element rather than a literary entree into a kind of science fictional magic realism.

His plague is pretty weird stuff, but it's a single transforming element out of which Calder extrapolates and exfoliates a highly detailed, colorful, and quite specific altered world. And it is *within* this well-rendered and believable physical, cultural, technological, economic, and political matrix that his more phantasmagorical imagistic transformations occur.

Thus, by feeding his stream of personal inner imagery, which can probably only be fully comprehended on its deepest levels by himself, through this interface of old-fashioned science fictional plausibility rather than relying on nanotech as a literary excuse to simply concretize any symbolic reality he pleases, Calder gains sufficient distance from the material to make it accessible enough to find a natural readership of a certain reasonable size.

And the non-transparency of the

prose, while it may not be the sort of thing likely to be found within the pages of your average Hugo winner or best seller, is exactly the right instrument for both the material and the sort of readership who is going to enjoy such material in the first place. It rocks and it rolls. It takes its chances. It describes and embodies the detailed altered popular culture from which it and the protagonists arise.

All and all, *Dead Girls* is not only a first novel at least as promising as, say, *Queen City Jazz*, but good enough to be counted among the twenty or thirty best science fiction novels published in any given recent year. And if this sounds like faint praise, consider the fact that several *hundred* science fiction novels are now published every year.

So why has *Dead Girls*, as of this writing, despite considerable effort on the part of the author's agent, failed to find a publisher in the United States? I know this because the British agent in question bemoaned this to me in no little consternation and confusion and sent me a copy of the British edition.

On an entirely tautological level, the answer, of course, is obvious. No American publisher has chosen to publish it because no American publisher believes it will appeal to a readership large enough to make it commercially viable.

How many readers does it take to make a paperback first science fiction novel commercially viable in the American market? Well, assuming a $5000 advance, not lavish but not mingy beyond reason, a cover price around $4.95, and a larcenously low royalty rate of 6 percent, we're talking not much more than 15,000.

In a market of over a quarter of a billion people, there are not fifteen thousand readers skilled and sophisticated enough to enjoy a science fiction novel written on a level like this?

Does not compute.

After all, *this very magazine* is read by at least a hundred thousand people every month. Many of the stories in it require similar reading skills to comprehend and a similar level of intellectual sophistication to read with enjoyment. And, so, I might add, does this very essay.

Can it be that less than 15 percent of you enjoy more than half of the stories you buy this magazine to read? Can it be that less than 15 percent of you know what the hell I'm talking about?

I don't believe it. I certainly don't *want* to believe it.

But on the evidence, it would seem that American book publishers do. ●



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MARCH 1995

3-5—**World Horror Convention.** For info, write: **Box 148, Clarkston GA 30021.** Or phone: **(404) 921-7148** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Atlanta GA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Sheraton Colony Square. Guests will include: A. M. Clark, Alice Cooper, John Farris.

3-5—**AstronomiCon. (716) 342-4697.** Radisson, Rochester NY. David Drake, Robin Wood, the Penneys.

3-5—**VisionCon. (417) 886-7219.** Holiday Inn University Plaza, Springfield MO. No more, at press.

3-5—**ConFlation. (314) 385-2875.** Radisson, Clayton MO. S. Satterfield, Betsy Rickert. Relaxacon.

4-5—**Antiquarian & Used Books. (702) 384-5838.** Civic Center, Santa Monica CA. Literature, art.

10-12—**Bash.** Holiday Inn, Taunton MA. Max (Rom) Grodenchik, Star Trek: DS9. Artist Bob Eggleton.

10-12—**ConAmazoo. (708) 328-8765.** Radisson, Kalamazoo MI. Emphasis on friends, fun and frolic.

17-19—**LunaCon, Box 3566, Church St. Stn., New York NY 10008.** Hilton, Rye Brook NY. P. Anderson.

17-19—**RevelCon, Box 980744, Houston TX 77098. (713) 526-5625.** SF media fanzines. Adults only.

17-19—**Creation, 530 Riverdale Dr., Glendale CA 91204. (818) 409-0960.** Pasadena CA. Star Trek.

24-26—**MidSouthCon, Box 22749, Memphis TN 38122. (901) 274-7355.** Artist Alan Gutierrez, Bolego.

24-26—**MillenniCon, Box 636, Dayton OH 45405. (513) 277-9229.** Stouffers Plaza. David Brin.

24-26—**ConTinuity, Box 19713, Birmingham AL 35219. (205) 678-2112.** At the Civic Center & Inn.

31-Apr. 2—**ConCept, Box 405 Stn. H, Montreal PQ H3G 2L1. (514) 288-1692.** Holiday Metro Center.

31-Apr. 2—**ICon, Box 550, Stony Brook NY 11790. (516) 632-6045.** On SUNY campus. Pohl, Kress.

31-Apr. 2—**S. T. Con, Box 22188, Bankers Hall, Calgary AB T2P 4J5. (403) 284-9692.** Mark Lenard.

31-Apr. 2—**FILKONtario, 302 College Ave. W. #20, Guelph ON N1G 4T6. (905) 574-6212.** SF folksinging.

JULY 1995

13-16 **DragonCon, Box 47696, Atlanta GA 30362. (404) 925-2813.** NASFiC. $50 to 3/15, $55 to 6/15.

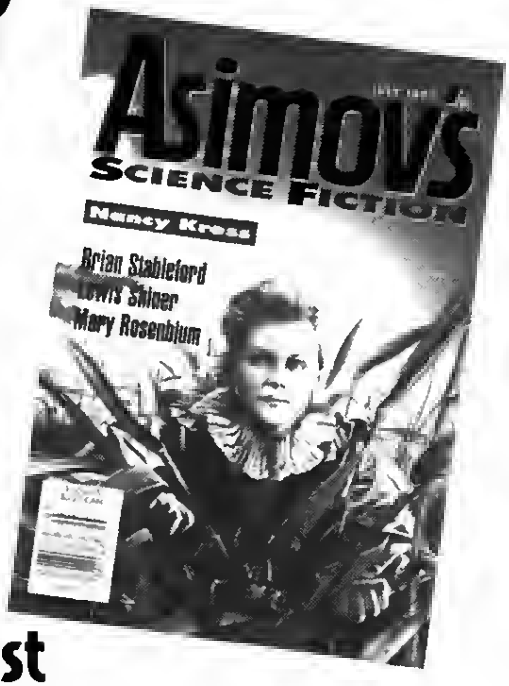
AUGUST 1995

24-28 **Intersection, Box 15340, Washington DC 20003. (301) 345-5186.** Glasgow UK. WorldCon. $125.

AUGUST 1997

28-Sep. 1—**LoneStarCon 2, Box 27277, Austin TX 78755.** San Antonio TX. The 1997 WorldCon. $80.

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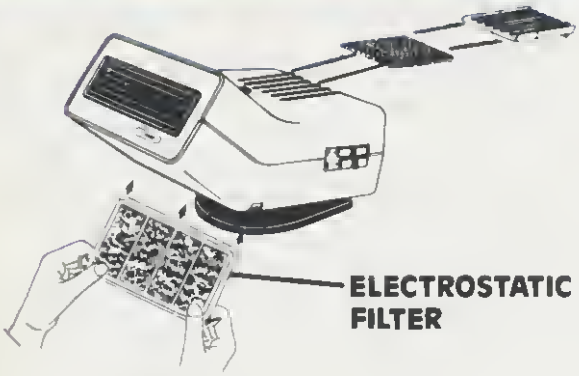
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